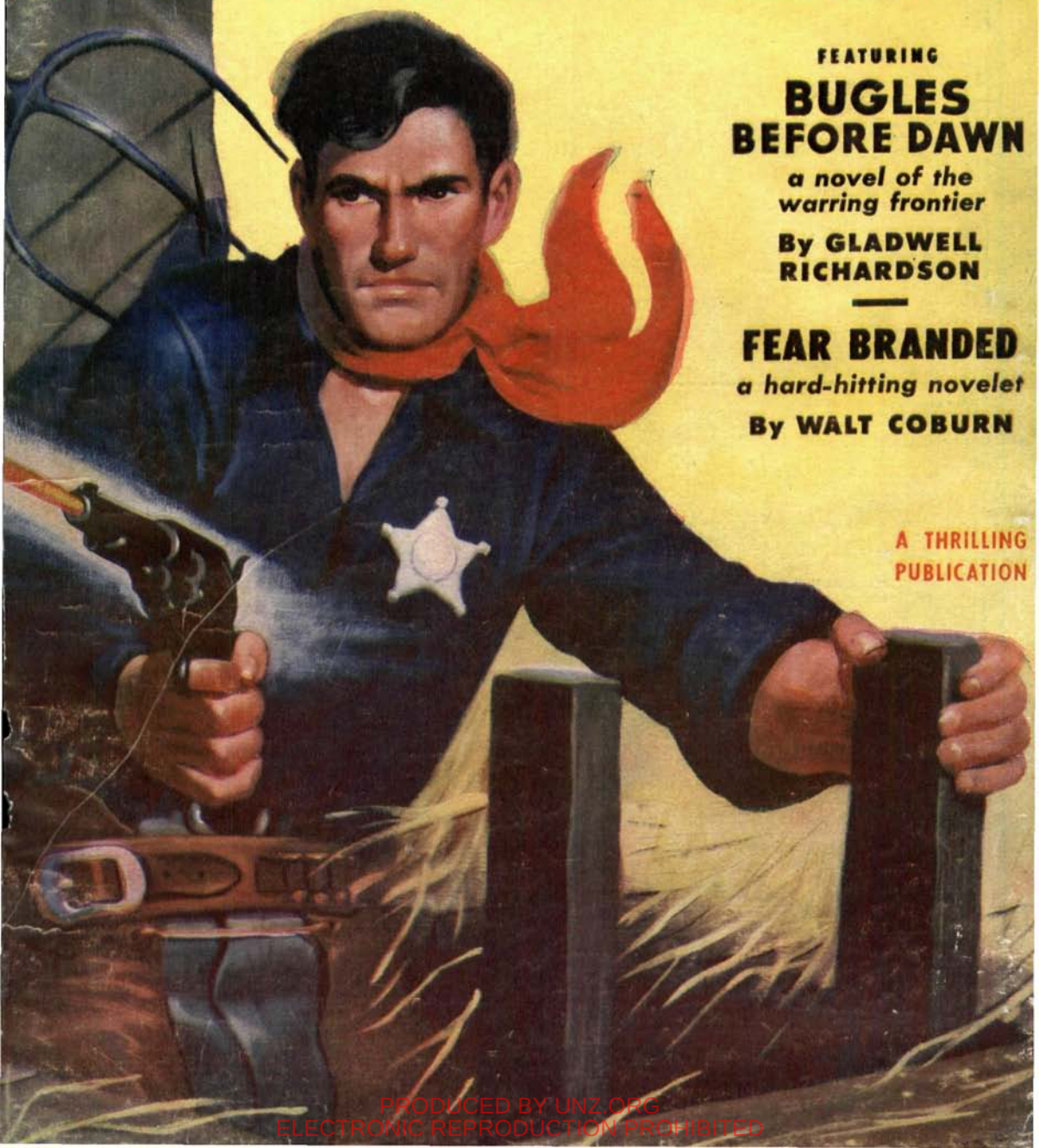
Giant Western

ALL STORIES BRAND NEW
COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE



FEATURING

BUGLES BEFORE DAWN

a novel of the warring frontier

By GLADWELL RICHARDSON

FEAR BRANDED

a hard-hitting novelet

By WALT COBURN

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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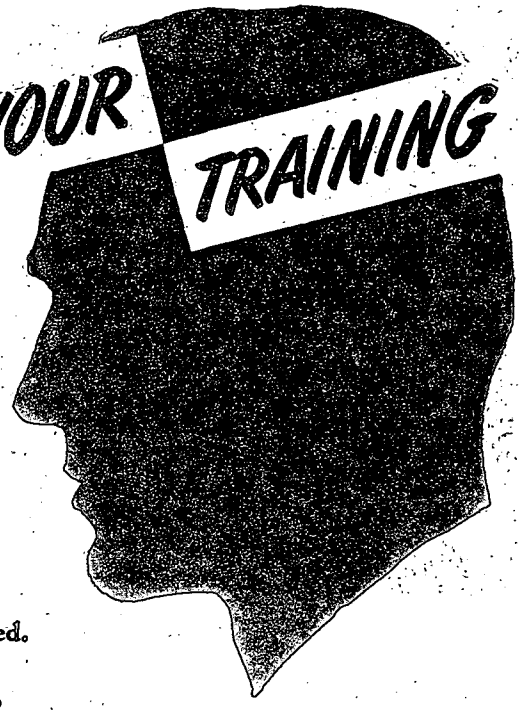

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Giant western

VOL. 7, No. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION APRIL, 1951

A Full-Length Novel

BUGLES BEFORE DAWN . GLADWELL RICHARDSON 9

They called Captain Forest an embittered sourpuss who expected the most from his men—but they were to learn he didn't spare himself, either, when the Navajos kicked up dust on the warpath!

A Complete Novelet

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FUR, FINS, and FEATHERS

A Department Conducted by FRANCIS H. AMES, Hunting and Fishing Expert

THE WEST is a hell of a big place, and it's still there, make no mistake about it. I've seen punchers of the old days, squatting in chaps, boots and spurs, along Beaver Creek in Montana near the old 101, fishing with willow poles like so many kids. I've seen them chasing coyotes and quail in Texas, and hunting deer along the San Antone river. Down on the Miller and Lux ranch, in California, I've seen them hunting wild pig with buckshot loaded shotguns, and I've been along when they hunted squirrel on the blackjacked bottoms of Oklahoma.

There's a lot of fish and game left if you know where to look, from Texas to the Dakotas, and west to the Pacific slope. There were over 38,000 deer killed in Oregon in 1948, and five thousand elk. That's a lot of meat in any man's language.

The ducks don't come down in clouds to darken the sun, as I saw them do along Sandstone creek on my father's old O. K. ranch, in Custer county Montana, in the old days. But you can still fill your bag limit. I saw ducks stretching almost solid from horizon to horizon last year along the Columbia at dawn.

There's trout in the streams and lakes, and bass and crappie in the ponds of the west. Along the Pacific slope the salmon and the big sea trout come in from salt water in the very same rivers where the Indians pitched their teepees and built their smoking fires. Some of the Indians are still there, doing their fish smoking today.

I've seen plenty of big buck deer this year, and a bear or so. Three cougar were killed within a mile of my shanty this summer and a flock of geese durn near knocked off my hat when I was fishing, only yesterday.

Question: What is the difference between mule deer and blacktail?

—D. M., Ansonia, Conn.

Answer: The blacktail is the smaller of the two deer, generally. A good mule buck will run between 150 and 175, while a good blacktail will average between 125 and 150 dressed. The mule deer frequents more open country, while the blacktail is a coastal deer, frequenting forested and brushed country. The mule can be identified by the large, flaring ears. The tails on both specimens are too insignificant for identification purposes when they are going away from your gun. I have seen deer on the Cascade range, high on the summit, above Eugene, Oregon, that appeared to be a cross between the two, weighing up to 190 pounds.

Question: How far should you lead a duck on a crossing shot? I seem to do a lot of missing.—D. L. B., Freeborn, Minn.

Answer: And who doesn't! This can be computed by figuring the shot string travel roughly at a thousand feet per second and the duck at forty miles per hour, a hundred feet away. This figures down to a duck traveling around 20 feet per second across your blind. At a hundred feet the shot would reach the feathered bomb shell in a tenth of a second, during which time the duck would travel

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two feet. These figures don't do you much good, however, among the cattails on a frosty morning, I've found. There are too many variable factors to interfere with the slide rule, i.e., reflex speed of the gunner, whether he swings with his bird or not, actually how far the bird is away, and not guessing. With a wind on his tail he may make twenty miles faster than with a head wind, depending on how scared the critter is.

I usually swing with my bird, pass him, guess my speed and range, and let her flicker. If a crowded blind or an obstacle prevents swing I lead twice as much as otherwise. Sometimes I hit 'em.

Question: What's the fightingest fresh water game fish in the west, and how do you take them?—F. R. C., Minot, N. D.

Answer: That's a tough question, Frank. A twelve inch rainbow in fast water will make you jump if you're battling him on a three ounce wand and a half pound leader. For my money, the silver, or coho salmon can break up more tackle than any other western game fish in fast water. It would be a toss up between the silver salmon and the big sea-run rainbow, or steelhead trout. The silver runs from eight up to over twenty pounds and the steelhead somewhat smaller, but not much.

The silver salmon can be taken in Pacific coastal streams from Alaska to California, usually in October and November. The steelhead is taken in the same waters, from November to March in some areas. Some steelhead and salmon are taken in some of the larger coast rivers in summer months.

The most generally accepted lure for silver salmon are red wool or feathered spinners in sizes three and four, but for my money use a two to three inch lure of the Russelure, Flatfish, Daredevle, Do-Dad types. Pull them slow and deep and steady for salmon.

Steelhead will take the above lures, but are more readily taken on salmon roe bait. Fish this by drifting in fast water, long current drifts, slowly and deep. The red wool on the spinner is better than the feathers, for it fluffs out in water. Be sure those artificials are in red or yellow for the hard fighting coho.

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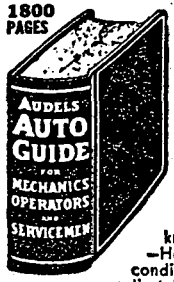

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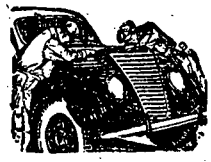

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I'LL PULL THE JOB DURING THE COCKTAIL HOUR...
OKAY, MEET ME AT FOUR BELLS BY THE FIREROOM VENTILATORS. THEY'LL NEVER SEARCH DOWN BELOW
ENGINE ROOM
WHILE THE TRANS-ATLANTIC LINER S.S. "LA SALLE" PLOWS THROUGH THE WINTER NIGHT TOWARD NEW YORK, FIREMAN JOE BLIGH OVERHEARS AN INTERESTING CONVERSATION...
...AND MY DAUGHTER'S JEWELS ARE MISSING!
IF I'D ONLY GIVEN THEM TO THE PURSER!
H-M-M-M, BLIGH WAS RIGHT
LATER
W-W-WHAT TH'...
DROP 'EM, "FUNNY"! PUT UP YOUR HANDS!
"FUNNY MONEY" COOK IS ONE OF OUR BEST-KNOWN COUNTERFEITERS. THIS JEWEL THEFT WAS JUST A DIVERSION
AND MR. BLIGH HERE IS A FEDERAL OPERATIVE
I'VE ASKED MR. BISHOP AND HIS DAUGHTER TO JOIN US AT MY TABLE
MISS BISHOP'S A KNOCKOUT. YES, AND THAT REMINDS ME, I NEED A SHAVE
RAZOR PULLS, EH? TRY THIS THIN GILLETTE BLADE
SOME DIFFERENCE! THIS THIN GILLETTE SKIMS 'EM OFF LIKE MAGIC!
YES, THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN AND LONG-LASTING
OUR WINTER HOME IS IN WASHINGTON. I HOPE YOU'LL CALL ON US SOON
I'M HONORED, SIR. I CERTAINLY SHALL
HE'S MY IDEA OF A HANDSOME MAN
YOU GET SLICK, COMFORTABLE SHAVES WITH THIN GILLETTES AND SAVE MONEY TOO. AMONG LOW-PRICE BLADES THEY'RE THE KEENEST AND LONGEST-LASTING KIND THERE IS. SO TO ENJOY SHAVING EASE AND ECONOMY AS WELL, ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE TEN-BLADE PACKAGE WITH HANDY USED-BLADE COMPARTMENT
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They called Captain Forest Thomas an embittered sourpuss who expected the most of his men—but they were to learn he never spared himself, either!

BUGLES before dawn

MUD and stone walls around a rectangular plaza was all there was to Fort Defiance. Hardly more than an arrow flight from the New Mexico border in northeastern Arizona Territory, it was the last post on the warring frontier, the ultimate, beyond the fringe of civilization.

A Novel by GLADWELL RICHARDSON

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Peaceful and Friendly Were the Navajos—Till

Garrisoned by a company of the 1st Cavalry, and one of infantry, New Mexico Volunteers, it lay in the path of raiders, outlaws and fighting Indians. It had been built originally in the midst of the Indian tribes to pacify them and maintain order after occupation of the Southwest in 1846, but that this venture had succeeded was open to question.

The outbreak of the Civil War saw the various tribes and New Mexicans hitting the war trail when regular troops were withdrawn. Volunteer corps were established, commanded by regular line officers for the upper bracket, but this meant, however, that some regiments were officered entirely by New Mexicans.

Out of the chaos, under General Carleton, with headquarters for the department in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the thinly strung troops finally began to make headway. Indian tribes were rounded up, confined to prison reservations wherever possible. But against the Apache and Navajo Indians the war produced only half results. For the Navajos were still running free for three hundred miles west of Fort Defiance. Only half of the tribe had been transported from their ancient homeland to Fort Sumner.

Roving bands of their warriors still plagued the Southwest. They struck from canyon fastnesses at the Mormon settlements in Utah, to as far eastward as the pueblos around Santa Fe. Apaches raided from the south, Utes down from north of the San Juan out of Colorado. Only the largest patrols and heaviest armed troops could enter the area and expect to come out alive.

Fort Defiance took the brunt of this death and destruction. Colonel Sudhoff, former Albuquerque business man, a New Mexico volunteer, didn't have the troops or the equipment for the necessary extensive campaigns to subdue the roving raiders. So he simply held on at Fort Defiance and wrote reports and made requests to Albuquerque.

GENERAL CARLETON there was convinced that a few good field officers could whip the volunteer Westerners into some semblance of efficient soldiers. Perhaps because he was himself from the West Point Military Academy. So he requested the authorities in Washington to send him a few field officers of the line. Not that he ever expected to get them.

But one day he did, when in August of 1864, Captain Forest Thomas rode through the sally port of the red wall at Fort Defiance. His cold blue eyes surveyed the quarters, barracks and stables built solid on three sides of the rectangle, picking out unerringly the door that opened into the office of the Officer of the Day, the only place boasting a narrow, plank porch roof. He dismounted from his big-boned dun gelding without touching the saddle with a finger.

Three troopers lazed on the bench against the wall under the roof out of the heat. They were not orderlies, as he supposed.

"Here, one of you," he called sharply. "Take my bags off and deliver my mount to the stable sergeant."

The crispness of his voice, the coldness of his eyes brought the three into a form of attention. None saluted. They were, in fact, goggle-eyed and dazed with surprise. At Fort Defiance officers didn't bother men in the heat of the day.

"Move!" the captain snapped. "You!" He selected the nearest private.

"Yessir," the trooper stuttered, obeying with some alacrity.

Inside the office Thomas saw a lieutenant with his faded tunic open, leaning back in a chair, his unpolished boots

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on a corner of the desk. His eyes widened on the captain, and he grinned.

"Guess you're the field officer we're supposed to get," he drawled.

"I am, Lieutenant." Thomas' voice snapped like a whip. "Here are my orders." He dropped them on the desk. "Will you be good enough to tell me if the colonel is available?"

The lieutenant was almost as befud-

FOREST THOMAS

dled as the troopers outside had been. This captain was obviously a stickler for form, and a mean egg. He came to his feet, stealthily buttoning his tunic.

"I think he is, sir," he said weakly.

In the doorway to the next room a bare-headed, paunchy man with a gray mustache, and wearing suspenders over his undershirt, halted on the threshold, his gaze going immediately to the smart uniform of the new arrival. Six foot two, wide of shoulder and lean of hips, the captain possessed all the requisites for a cavalryman.

"What's up, Greene?" he said to the lieutenant.

"Captain Thomas has arrived, Colonel."

"You're Captain Thomas?"

"I am, sir," Thomas snapped his heels, and saluted smartly. "I have just arrived via Albuquerque."

This Colonel Sudhoff, was Thomas' first impression, would have looked more at home behind a store counter. His frown gave way to annoyance, then he brightened.

"Well, we're glad to have you, Cap'n," he said. "Greene here will show you your quarters. You will take over Company C. That's the only cavalry we got around here." He turned and disappeared.

Not the slightest expression marked Thomas' face, but Lieutenant Greene looked away guiltily when he turned.

"Come along, sir," Greene said. "I'll show you. Ain't this heat awful?"

Captain Thomas' horse had been taken away, and his heavily packed saddle-bags were lying against a pole supporting the roof.

"Grab hold of his dunnage, Sparks," Greene said to one of the lounging men, "and bring it along."

"Sure, Lieutenant!"

The trooper followed the captain and the lieutenant along the wall. Wind drifted sand and refuse lay in front of warped door before which Greene stopped. There was more sand inside on the floor when Greene flung the door open.

"Here you are, sir," he murmured.

Sparks carried the bags inside, dropping them and quickly backing out.

WHEN Greene was gone Thomas glanced around the small room. An empty pitcher and wash bowl on a stand. A rusted iron cot, complete with shuck mattress, one blanket and one sheet,

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which might have been free of sand some distant time in the past. Otherwise, the room was austerely bare, mud-plastered and cracked.

Thomas grinned. It was a wry grin, yet somehow it lighted up the hardness of his homely face. He turned to his bags, sorting out clothing, and putting things to rights. He removed the dress uniform he had bought in distant St. Louis, and changed to fatigue dress.

Stepping to the open door he glanced out. The two troopers slouched to their feet at sight of him, started warily across the plaza toward quarters.

"Here, men!" Thomas called. "Come here."

They shuffled up, uneasy and wondering what they might be in for.

"You," Thomas said to one, "bring a broom and sweep the sand out of my quarters."

The trooper turned around and started off.

"Hold it!" Thomas snapped, and the man turned. "When I address you, come to attention. When I give you an order, salute. Is that clear?"

"Yeah," the trooper gulped.

"The reply is 'Yes, sir!' "

"Yes, sir," both men dutifully echoed.

"Now get that broom and start to work in here."

The trooper saluted and tramped off.

"Your name is Sparks, I believe," Thomas said to the other. "Go get the sergeant of Company C and bring him here."

"I reckon maybe the sarge went off some place. Maybe he ain't back yet—sir."

Thomas' voice shook. "Sparks, I said get me the sergeant of the company, and I mean exactly that!"

Before retreat that night, the entire command knew all about Captain Thomas, had him tucked away in a definite pigeon-hole. He was tagged as an embittered sourpuss, a regular who would insist on the fullest military discipline. And rumor said he was frustrated because he had been transferred from the fields of glory to this lonely frontier where there were only redskins to fight.

They knew by now that he had been decorated five times, had been commissioned from a sergeant after the first battle of Bull Run. With a platoon of cavalry he had delayed a Rebel column from breaking through until supplies and artillery pulled up. He was badly wounded at Gettysburg, had fallen again at Missionary Ridge. Invalided home to St. Louis, he had recovered and now had been transferred here.

No doubt Thomas was a good field officer but, embittered and hard, would he make a good officer at Fort Defiance? No matter what happened, it looked as though Company C was in for hard times.

The captain's messenger found Sergeant Jube Herlits of C Company in the blacksmith shop, shoeing his horse. He swore, but went to barracks, washed and dressed in the only complete cavalry uniform he owned. The yellow stripes on the trousers were faded white, right down into the tops of the boots that had never been polished.

When he got to Thomas' room, Herlits stepped in briskly, tossed a snappy salute, and waited, his face wooden.

"Sit down, Sergeant," Thomas said.

Herlits did, stiffly.

THOMAS rolled a cigarette, studying the noncom who would be most important to his new command. The man was small, wiry, bow-legged and tough as whang leather, a born plainsman, and a sure guide over known and unknown terrain.

The saber scar on Thomas' left jaw, a memento of Missionary Ridge, took on color as he pegged his sergeant, and was satisfied.

"Tell me about the company," he said abruptly.

From that instant on, Herlits never wavered in his belief in the new captain. Only a field officer of the first water would have enough sense to want to

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As Thomas fired, Scar Breast dropped his rifle and fell (Chap. XX)

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know and understand his command.

"A mixture of races, sir," Herlits informed. "Americanos, a few Mexicans from Santa Fe, some California volunteers, and a couple of Indian scouts. One old Navajo man, Dobahuzsin, is the best there is. The interpreter is a young half-breed we call Red Tommy."

"You can smoke," Thomas told him.

"I chaw, sir."

Herlits dug out a plug, bit off a chew, and plunged into his story.

The brief history of C Company, as Sergeant Herlits related it was neither startlingly brilliant, nor bad. Organized in Albuquerque at the outbreak of the war, its personnel had changed twice. First action was against a raid from Texas on Fort Union on the edge of the plains. Then it was shifted to the south, to take on several Apache tribes, then northward again, to be added to Colonel Peffer's command and help shake out Canyon de Chelly, stronghold of the Navajo tribe.

Returned to Santa Fe after a few months, Company C had relieved B here at Fort Defiance. Since then there had been only monotonous garrison duty, with an occasional reconnaissance in the Indian country around the fort.

Not much, yet Thomas sensed feats of bravery left untold. For in the sergeant's voice was undeniable pride in the fighting ability of his company. When he finished Thomas smiled drily.

"I gather that the company needs a general overhauling, Sergeant," he commented. "It couldn't be in the best of campaign shape, could it?"

Herlits shook his head forlornly.

"Begging the captain's pardon," he answered, "it ain't. Why, sir, with what we got to work with, we couldn't go more than twenty miles into Indian country and hope to get back to the fort under our own power."

"We'll start remedying the faults tomorrow morning, Sergeant," Thomas told him, rising from the cot. "Inspection of equipment immediately after colors."

"Yes, sir." Herlits saluted and walked out of the room.

Thomas belted on his sidearms for retreat, stood it, and returned to his room to rest. The ride from Ojo del Oso on the last leg of his journey had been tiresome. At dusk the mess sergeant, wearing a dirty flour sack as an apron, brought a lighted lamp into the room.

"Grub's on, sir," he reported and took himself off.

Apparently word had got around, Thomas surmised from the "sir" being tacked on.

In the mess, a large room beyond the O.D.'s office, Thomas found the five lieutenants stationed at Fort Defiance, the post sutler, and the surgeon. He acknowledged Lieutenant Greene's introductions formally, and without a smile.

There was a tense uneasiness in the group until Colonel Sudhoff appeared. With him was his daughter, Kara, a slender, olive-complexioned girl with a strange, haunting beauty that had its effect on the junior officers, Thomas saw. Her mother, he thought, must have been part Spanish, or Indian.

He bowed to Kara, who gave him a brief smile, and seated her at the colonel's left at the head of the table. The colonel invited Thomas to sit opposite her, next to Lieutenant Greene.

There was plenty of food, even potatoes from Mexican gardens. But the boiled beef was stringy and not too fat. As Thomas ate, he paid small attention to those around him, until Greene turned to him, off-handedly.

"By the way," he informed, "I am the lieutenant in your company."

Thomas almost grinned with pleasure at the opening.

"That can hardly be blamed on me, can it?"

All conversation ceased. Greene turned his red face back to his plate. In the silence Thomas caught Kara Sudhoff's black eyes surveying him. The colonel coughed, and the meal went on.

When it ended Thomas excused himself to the colonel and departed. The

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junior officers apparently meant to play cards and checkers, for the mess room was also their lounge. But Thomas did not propose to hang around just to be polite.

Entering his own room, he relit the lamp and closed the door against the cool that replaced the torrid heat of the day. Laying down on the cot, he stared at the ceiling.

But he was not seeing the poles that made it, the small limbs and twigs covering them that held back the hard, red mud of the roof. Bitterness was again eating into his soul like acid. Not bitterness over being sent West. He rather liked that, for it took him away from the source of what was troubling him —a woman, as in the case of many another man.

HE WAS visioning the golden crown of Mary Ann Zartmann's head, her full, ripe lips, the smoky promise of her eyes. False promise, false lips that had uttered meaningless words. He should have known, though. For men and women said and did many meaningless things in the excitement, the bustle of war.

Yet he had never been able to forget Mary Ann, and his bitterness was all the more acute, remembering the days when he had held her in his arms, the nights in balmy Washington when stolen kisses were sweetest.

He had returned to Washington from Bull Run as a second lieutenant. And even though the high command did not as yet think much of the mounted forces, Mary Ann made a fuss over him, showing him off in his new blue uniform with the gold bars. Her father, *the* Senator Zartmann, had fumed:

"A lieutenant, indeed? I'll see the secretary of war about this!"

"I'd rather you wouldn't, sir," Thomas had told him. "When I've more experience, I'll go on up."

"Tommyrot!" the Senator had snorted. "You'll be more than a lieutenant. Of course you'll go on up, young man! But the only way the top is ever reached is by forever pushing yourself!"

Thomas could chuckle over that now —grimly. Probably he hadn't had the "push."

Mary Ann had not discarded him until after Missionary Ridge. He had come through Washington on his way home to St. Louis, a wounded, bandaged hero. She and the senator made quite a to-do, driving him around Washington in a handsome carriage, making a show of getting him on the train for home. But before the bandages were off Mary Ann's letter had arrived, to tell him:

> I am sure, all things considered, we were not in love.

That had meant, of course that she had found a better climber, a harder pusher. She had not written again except to announce her marriage.

So here he was at Fort Defiance, said to be the worst post on the frontier, but Thomas hoped he was so far back of beyond he would hear no more of Mary Ann, the senator or the man she married, another army man, but with a sinecure in a bureau office. They could have cocktails and cotillions to their hearts' content in the safety of the capital.

A light knock on the door brought him back to reality. Before he could speak the door opened a crack.

"I saw your light," said Kara Sudhoff. "Do you mind if I come in?"

She entered, as Thomas sprang to his feet in surprise. She closed the door, gazing at him in appraisal.

II

KARA sat down, and Thomas asked if he might smoke. She nodded, and he lighted a treasured cigar and waited. He had noted that she spoke with an accent that wasn't Spanish, and apparently had been educated in a good school. When she began to talk, it was in a voice so low it could not carry beyond

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the door. And she was honest, straightforward.

"I don't know why you should be bitter because you have come here," she began seriously. "Is it because out here beyond what is called civilization, there is so little chance of promotion, for being recognized as an efficient officer?"

He made no comment. She appeared to know the obstacles to good officers doing satisfactory duty in the West. She studied him, unable to understand why he was so little interested.

"I'm sorry to bother you," she murmured. "If it wasn't so serious I would not have come. It is in the hope I can put you right. Frankly, Captain Thomas, you have started off badly here. I know of course that, being a regular, you probably have all professional officers' small opinions of our New Mexico volunteers. Regulars claim they are not soldiers, are slack in the performance of their duties, untrained, and caring little, are generally all-around misfits.

"I'd like to get you to see different. Our soldiers are as brave as any in the world! They can fight, and they can win. Except for the type of men you see here at this fort, or in all of New Mexico, the Southwest would have been overrun long ago—ever since Eighteen-sixty-one—and everybody killed. If you treat these volunteers as they should be treated and if they like you, believe me they will fight for you to the last bitter gasp!"

She paused, but again Thomas refrained from comment. He drew on the imported cigar which had been captured from the Rebels in the South and sold in St. Louis. Covertly he watched her, saw the resolve in her eyes, and the determined set of her chin.

"You may have had experience against Indians," she went on. "I don't know. I do know you have been up against the best troops of the South. And I know that most army officers belittle Indian fighting men. I would not like you to make that mistake.

"I know the Navajos. I am a quarter-blood. Captain Thomas, the Navajo is the hardest, shrewdest fighter of all Indians. Never cruel, he is not known as well as the bloodthirsty Apaches, or the Utes, and Comanches. But even those tribes fear the Navajo, for the Navajo uses strategy. He reasons out the quickest and the easiest way to kill you."

Thomas was principally interested in what she had revealed about herself. With quarter Navajo blood, she probably had first learned to speak that language, which accounted for her accent.

"Why do you bother to tell me all this?" he finally wanted to know.

"Because when my father was informed that Fort Defiance at last was to get a regular field officer, he had great hopes for the future. So far it has been trial and error, with never enough equipment or supplies to carry on an effective campaign. He hoped that with such an officer Fort Defiance would be properly recognized, that the rampaging Indians would be brought in. But, if you continue to misunderstand, as so many regulars do, you will only get good men killed, and wind up in disaster. That's why I'm appealing to you, to understand and help my father."

"I hardly believe you have cause to worry," he said drily.

SHE got to her feet, her red wool skirt dropping about her ankles.

"I see," she said gravely. "It was as I feared."

"Really there is no cause for alarm," he assured her. "I have been in the army since I was eighteen years old. I am twenty-six now. My first fight was against General Lee of the Confederacy at Harper's Ferry, when John Brown led an uprising of slaves. I have been in fourteen major battles, and no Indians could be more fear-inspiring than the Rebel yelling of Texans when they charge in the dawn. I have slept in the mud, snow and rain, cooked dough on a gun-barrel for a meal. Miss Sudhoff,

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I believe that I am experienced in more plain, bloody killing than anything the Navajos can produce."

Her eyes leveled on his face as she reached the door. She said quietly:

"You do not seem to be the way you act. Like jumping on kind-hearted Lieutenant Greene at mess." Then she was gone. . . .

Equipment, the captain found, was in a woeful state. He gave orders when the men stood colors the next morning—for the first time in months—for them to begin necessary repairs without delay. Saddles, pack equipment, all gear necessary for reconnaissance, or for a foray, were ordered made usable as fast as possible. But he felt like giving up in sheer despair when he found that not all of the mounts were shod. The men had been waiting on shoes and nails from the quartermaster in Albuquerque, which never seemed to arrive.

Thomas went to the blacksmith shop to discover the supply of iron on hand. Some flat bars, he saw, could be made into horseshoes and nails. He told the smithy that every mount in the company was to be shod, and necessary spares made for the troopers riding patrol, or reconnaissance.

Such energy was bound to have its effect, so soon the troopers were accomplishing much. Thomas was viewed with a small amount of grudging admiration.

But as the days passed, he did not unbend to the junior officers. He was a work horse, and he kept at it until he was satisfied the company could stand a month in the field. Then the men needed training.

He was proposing this to Colonel Sudhoff one afternoon when a band of renegade Navajos attacked the stock grazing on the meadows three miles away at Black Point. They drove in the guards, killed three horses, and went on their way. The attack apparently was only pure cussedness.

"Take a platoon and teach them better manners," Colonel Sudhoff told Thomas. "Whatever pack-mules you think you'll need."

Thomas smiled, for once.

"Would you mind sir, if I take only twenty men and no pack-mules?"

The Colonel showed his astonishment. "Cap'n, there's plenty of Indians out there. They'll cut you off, and lift your hair!"

"Twenty hard-riding men, their grub on the saddle, won't be long overhauling those renegades," Thomas replied. "We can be back here before much of an alarm is spread."

It sounded good, so the colonel said: "Try it, but I hope you know what you're doing!"

Thomas directed Herlits to pick the hardest riders and toughest fighters of the company to be ready to ride at once.

When he appeared, ready to mount his own horse, sidearmed and carrying a rifle in a scabbard, Herlits had the men drawn up in formation on the plaza. Soldiers watched curiously. The troopers selected to go along were wondering. Mounting, Captain Thomas pulled over before the O.D.'s room, facing his small patrol.

From officers on the porch came a hoarse whisper.

"I hope the boy general don't show us poor dumb Westerners how to fight Indians—and get himself and all them good men killed . . . Yeah, he's fighting a past master at cunning in the Navajo."

Thomas heard, but only gestured at Herlits, gave a command and led the troopers out of the fort. The two scouts joined them near Black Point where the Navajos had been seen, and the scouts read sign.

"Maybe thirty," "Red Tommy" reported "Hosteen Dobahuzsin says they're from Chief Muddy Waters' band, and the chief's with them."

THEY took the trail until dark. Then Thomas pulled off to feed a few handfuls of grain to the mounts and to eat. Dobahuzsin came in with Red Tommy.

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"We're pointed for Zuni," Dobahuzsin said. "Muddy Waters is headed there to raid the outlying jacals at dawn."

Thomas ordered an hour's rest, then his men hit saddle again. With the scouts guiding, they headed for the pueblo. Soon after midnight they were close enough to hear dogs barking and later, just before dawn, roosters crowing.

The two scouts, who had been prowling, came in quickly to inform that the Navajo band was stealing in toward the outlying houses after corn and blankets.

Thomas ordered his patrol forward. Shooting began, and cries of wounded villagers awoke the new morning. The troopers rode at a run, opening with their new repeating rifles. Attacked from the rear, Navajos died before they could flee. The remainder of the band of forty, instead of thirty, tried to go around Zuni to the south, but the troopers cut them off, turning them around the northern end of Thunder Mountain. Their horses tired, the renegades went into dodging tactics. Yet not once did they manage to throw off pursuit. The best they could do was to keep ahead of the patrol as the miles rolled by.

"Goin' in at Fort Sumner reservation," Herlits reported to Thomas. "Muddy Waters, when he's close pursued, dodges in there until he's rested up again enough to leave."

"This time maybe he'll get the surprise of his life."

Muddy Waters led his warriors inside the prison reservation, abandoned their horses and joined the Navajos there. Thomas found him with ten of his men. The greasy, fat, six-foot Navajo chief grinned when Thomas cornered him on the Pecos River sands.

When informed he was under arrest, the wily renegade showed anger. "Me no 'rest," he declared. "Me here to live. Keep the peace. Go 'way, soldier!"

Nevertheless he was taken with his ten men to the fort. The colonel in command listened to him as he had many times before. Then he was turned loose, and warned not to run away again.

"It's too bad, but that is all I can do," the colonel told Thomas.

"He's dodged in here to escape the consequences of his acts before, hasn't he? You know he'll run away whenever he chooses, and attack a patrol, a post or New Mexicans?"

"Yes," the colonel admitted sadly. "Yet I have orders that if they come in and give up, past misdeeds are to be forgotten and forgiven."

"Muddy Waters will be off this time as soon as we are out of sight," Herlits declared bitterly. "Old Dobahuzsin has been talking to Navajos who have been hearin' him brag. He'll finish what we stopped him from doin' at Zuni."

The next morning Thomas took his men away from the reservation, across the Pecos river, and hit the trail for Ojo del Oso. Following a brief halt, at noon, Thomas turned toward the main route between the reservation and Zuni. Five miles from the Pecos River he sent his men into hiding, the scouts and Herlits out on the scout.

An hour after sunset they were back. Muddy Waters had been sighted, and the route he was traveling. Thomas placed the troopers on the sides of a ravine through which the trail ran.

As Muddy Waters rode down it, with his men strung out behind him, all bent on completing their raid on Zuni, guns hurled flame and death into them out of the night. Muddy Waters and five others escaped because they were nearly out of the trap, and at daylight their tracks were discovered beating a speedy retreat to the reservation.

CAPTAIN THOMAS brought his men home in leisurely fashion after the furious chase. They rode in at Fort Defiance in better shape than when they left. When he had made his report briefly, the colonel smiled, and picked up a letter from which he quoted, saying that news of the wiping out of most of Muddy Waters' band had arrived from Fort

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Sumner via the commanding general in Albuquerque. Such tactics, the letter said, would keep renegades from running away from the reservation and discourage those not yet surrendered from making war. There were orders to keep Captain Thomas in the field. And with this dispatch a second lieutenant in command of fifty cavalrymen had arrived, raising Company C strength to two hundred.

Even so the skirmish with Chief Muddy Waters hardly established Captain Thomas as invincible in the field against Indians. The men who had been with him were loud in their praise of him, but the attitude of the other officers was that he must have been lucky.

Wait and see how he performed against some other foe than a poorly equipped raider.

Lieutenant Greene, and a new officer, Lieutenant Wandrow, renewed their efforts at whipping the company into shape for extensive service in the field. Rumors were rife that Fort Defiance would be made headquarters for a considerable force. The Mormons of Utah, the stockmen and miners of Colorado, were yelling that something must be done to eliminate the dangers in the old Navajo country, where most of the raids developed.

Thomas worked himself early and late. When he did see the colonel, he found him elated at the surprising progress. After the captain had formed a support unit of supply, he began taking platoons away over night on field exercises.

He returned one afternoon from such a jaunt to find a big freight train in with supplies. An ambulance, which always meant Very Important People as passengers, and a double seated rig had come along.

Thomas saw the new arrivals across the parade ground collected before the office, but gave them no thought for the moment.

When he started away from the stables for quarters, the scouts stopped him.

"We got news," said Red Tommy. "We been hearin' things from around Wide Ruins wash."

"What?" Thomas asked. The scouts were always "hearing things."

"Several district chiefs are collecting their men for an attack on Fort Defiance," Red Tommy announced casually.

"What?" Thomas said dumbfounded. He had never supposed the Navajos would dare attack such a place as Fort Defiance.

"It is true," replied Red Tommy. "They make the war medicine."

"When?"

Red Tommy shrugged "Maybe weeks from now. Maybe months. They in no hurry."

Dobahuzsin spoke a few words and lapsed immediately into his usual taciturnity.

"He say, be sure to tell you not forget," Red Tommy said, "the Navajos come with the dawn. Like best to fight then."

Thomas thanked them and strode on

[*Turn page*]

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toward the office. Ten feet from the porch he saw an officer resplendent in dress uniform step toward him, halting to block his path. He recognized him instantly.

Major Elias Trestle! The man Mary Ann had married!

Thomas went gray around the lips, for he sensed animosity in the man, recognized trouble for himself. He fought against showing his surprise that Trestle should have shown up here, of all unexpected places, all the while realizing that Mary Ann must have come along, which was the reason for the special conveyance.

"Well," the major said, eyeing Thomas' dusty fatigues, a sneer on his thick lips, "I see this fort does need an executive officer. I shall take care of such people as you immediately!"

THERE was no reason for this major to know that Thomas had ever known Mary Ann. The officer just didn't like the captain's looks. Thomas' blood boiled. He thrust out his jaw.

"It might interest you, sir," he snapped coldly, "to know that I have just returned from two days and a night of field training. No extra clothing is carried on such trips."

"Hold your tongue, Captain!" the major snapped. "There is no excuse for an officer appearing as you do."

"Think you're standing parade at Fort Leavenworth, Major?" Thomas wanted to know. "Or maybe behind your desk, safely out of the battle lines, back in Washington?"

"Hold your tongue, I said!"

"I will, when it pleases me."

"Insubordination!" raged the major. "Rank impertinence!"

"What are you doing out here anyway? Things getting tough in Virginia, so you ducked out West to keep from risking your neck?"

"You are under arrest!" the major roared, his little mustache quivering. His eyes shot to Herlits, who had followed Thomas across the plaza. "Sergeant!" he snapped.

Herlits saluted. "Yes, sir?"

"You're my witness to this disrespect to a superior officer. Come along!"

"Me, sir?" Herlits did not move. "I can't be no witness, because I didn't hear or see anything, sir."

III

HERLITS spoke coolly, certainly. Major Trestle whirled around, his mouth dropping open in astonishment. He had forgotten that the officers on the porch, now disappearing fast, undoubtedly had witnessed the entire episode.

Ignoring the angry major, the captain deliberately walked around him and entered the office. Colonel Sudhoff was slouched in a chair, his tunic half-unbuttoned.

"Oh, Captain Thomas!" he called. "I have news. A company of cavalry and two of foot are en route to Fort Defiance from Albuquerque. I—"

Major Trestle plunged furiously into the room.

"Colonel!" he squalled. "This disreputable captain had the nerve to talk back to me. He insulted me! Insubordination!"

The colonel's face puckered up. "Wait a minute, Major Trestle," he said. "Are you acquainted with Captain Thomas here, our field officer?"

"Thomas—Thomas?" the major queried sharply.

He swung around, and a slow light began to flicker in his eyes. He knew this captain now. And strangely the recognition took the bluster out of him. It was replaced by pure hatred.

"I don't want dissension in my command, Major," Colonel Sudhoff went on, unperturbed. "Come in here and let me tell you something."

He turned into the private office. Major Trestle followed without another word for Thomas. The captain went out on the porch to which some of the lieutenants had returned, Lieutenant Wandrow among them. Wandrow grinned

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sympathetically, and whispered:

"The major was in Albuquerque a week before I left. Washington big shots behind him. He was telling General Carleton how to conduct his Indian campaigns."

Thomas grinned wryly. "Maybe one of those campaigns would take off the fat he's got from sitting on his haunches."

He walked to his room, and had closed the door behind him when he heard the rustle of silk, and whirled around.

Mary Ann stood before him, a white shawl over her shoulders, the rich folds of a silk dress sweeping the floor. Staggered by the suddenness of the meeting, for a moment he was unable to speak.

"Forest—Forest my dear!" she whispered, and came toward him, her lovely head thrown back, her hair glistening, and her red lips inviting.

"Forest!" she breathed. "Imagine! On this wild frontier we're together again."

Shock ran through him. Quickly he moved aside.

"Surprised?" she asked, smiling.

"Well—" he said oddly. "I haven't quite got over it."

"You dear!" She would have thrown her arms about him, but he backed away. "I know"—she laughed—"I haven't made my peace with you. But you do still love me, don't you, Forest?"

It struck him curiously that she still believed she held the power to bend him to her whimsical will. That had been true—once. An hour ago Thomas would have been uncertain whether or not she still could. Now he began to realize that a vast change had come over him, that he was master of his own emotions.

"Mary Ann," he said, "there are proprieties that must be observed. Especially here in such a small place as Fort Defiance."

"Why, of course, dear," she agreed. "But we can be discreet. There will be moments when—" Her voice trailed off with unspoken promise.

He could not have been more startled had she slapped his face. Never would he have believed her cheap. Yet now she was actually suggesting clandestine meetings.

"I mean"—steel was in his voice—"you should not be in my room. You are the major's wife. Your every move will be watched and reported. Undoubtedly you were seen entering this room."

"Oh, that!" She brushed the matter aside with a tinkling laugh. "Who would dare speak ill of the major's wife? Don't be ridiculous. But if you insist I'll be careful in the future."

"Mary Ann, there will be no 'future'," he replied.

SHE seemed unable to understand that Thomas was no longer amenable to her will. She started to protest, but he stopped her and changed the subject.

"Fort Defiance is one place I never expected to encounter Major Trestle. Nor Senator Zartmann's daughter."

She smiled uncertainly. "Well, Elias wanted duty away from Washington, and Papa talked to the Secretary of War."

"I see," he said drily. "Johnny Reb is still able to put up a big fight, and I imagine General Grant is throwing every man into the lines he can get his hands on for the final push."

"I don't appreciate the tone of your voice," she said plaintively.

"The Senator," he retorted with mirthless humor, "interceded to get his son-in-law well out of the danger of being sent into the combat area. This billet in the West was open, so out you came. Well, my dear Mary Ann, I'm afraid the major made a mistake."

"A mistake?"

"Yes, by thinking there is no war going on out here. We'll soon be campaigning against a foe with three centuries of experience fighting the Spaniards."

"You're unspeakable!" she retorted, color suffusing her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Mary Ann. I'm discovering several facts about myself."

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"You quit this!" she exclaimed lightly, coming on across to him. "Forest, there is no reason why we can't be friends!"

She backed quickly away as the door opened. Coolly, Kara Sudhoff walked in.

Mary Ann's stare became one of furious anger. But before she could hurl words, Thomas said quietly:

"Mrs. Trestle, have you met Miss Sudhoff yet?"

"I certainly have," Mary Ann replied pettishly. "And even a colonel's daughter should be polite enough not to interrupt a private conversation."

Kara showed not the least trace of resentment. Her unfathomable eyes lifted to Thomas.

"You'll pardon my interruption, Captain? I thought of checking your room, unaware that you had returned. Sometimes the wind fills our quarters with sand. More so than usual, I mean."

Thomas knew there was another reason for her being here. Then he heard steps on the baked ground outside. Major Trestle halted before the door, glancing angrily inside. Behind him stood two junior officers. Kara moved to the center of the floor. Her presence must have surprised the major.

"Shall we continue our rounds, Mrs. Trestle?" Kara said clearly. "I'm sorry there are no other ladies at the post. Oh!" She pretended to see Major Trestle for the first time. "I didn't see you, Major. We were just getting ready to return to our own quarters."

"Hello, Elias," Mary Ann said. "Miss Sudhoff, I think I've seen enough for today. Thank you so much for showing me around." With a flounce of silk skirts she tripped out.

When the Trestles were gone, Kara glanced critically at Captain Thomas. The semblance of a smile touched her lips.

"You will need to be more discreet, Captain Thomas," she said. "That woman is dangerous. And stupid."

"How, stupid?" he asked, frowning.

"In a small place like this the few women here are watched by dozens of unseen eyes."

"You are quite right. So you came to save me embarrassment?"

"When I discovered that Major Trestle was looking for his wife, I knew he would find out where she was. So I came first. To make the incident have the appearance of, shall we say, respectability?"

"You puzzle me, Kara," he answered.

"I do not want scandal here," she told him levelly. "And you have already had an argument with the major."

She walked out the open door.

AT SUPPER that night Thomas found two extra tables in the small, overcrowded mess room. He was glad, for it put the Sudhoffs and the Trestles at one table, while he presided over the junior officers' table. He could eat, and get out immediately, which he did.

In his room, he tried to read a text book on plains strategy in fighting Indians, but gave up and went to bed. He could not sleep, for disillusionment had set in. How could he ever have believed Mary Ann a lovely, sweet-minded girl? The girl he had wanted to marry!

Now he knew the truth. She was shallow, grasping and not too intelligent. It surpised him to realize that the bitterness he had known ever since she had jilted him, was gone. He grinned in the darkness.

Curiously enough, he was not thinking of her at all when he went to sleep—but of Kara Sudhoff. The girl's motives intrigued him. . . .

Thomas awoke with a start. The lamp was burning and an orderly stood beside the cot, calling his name.

"The colonel wants to see you at once, sir."

It was one o'clock in the morning. This would be an emergency. Thomas dressed hurriedly, and hastened to the office.

Lieutenant Greene had the duty. As Thomas strode in, he waved at the door of the colonel's lighted office. Inside, the

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colonel sat at the field desk. Opposite him sat a short, rather chunkily built New Mexican smoking a quirly.

"This is Mr. Blas Lucero, Captain Thomas," the colonel introduced.

The New Mexican jumped up, smiled, bowed, and extended a puffy limp hand. Thomas felt an instant dislike, not knowing why he should. Lucero sat down, studying Thomas under the brim of his floppy hat.

"We will wait for Major Trestle," the colonel began. "Oh," he added quickly, "here he is now. Major, Mr. Lucero!"

Trestle appeared with full side arms, shiny new. Thomas hid a grin, but whatever the major did would amuse him. Trestle shook hands expansively, completely ignoring Thomas' presence.

"Mr. Lucero," the colonel informed, "is a trader who knows the Indian country. He reports a war party of Navajo renegades in the Chinle valley."

Lucero said he had scouted the Navajo's into a camp at sundown, that they were recruiting their stock, and undoubtedly were preparing to make a murderous raid.

"Mr. Lucero," said Colonel Sudhoff, "has fought Navajos, was of aid to the army in the previous roundup. With his information, this should be our opportunity to make a strike. . . . Comment?"

He looked at Thomas, but it was Major Trestle who spoke, importantly.

"We can start by dawn, sir. A hundred pack animals will be enough. Likely this will be an extended campaign."

Thomas saw Lucero look startled. Trestle, however, was speaking entirely without experience with desert warfare. Waiting politely until the major finished the colonel reminded:

"This is your job, Cap'n Thomas."

"Fifty men, stripped for field work, on the run," Thomas replied. "Ten pack mules. That ought to do it, Colonel." He asked Lucero quickly: "How far up the Chinle are they?"

"Perhaps fifty miles north of the Defiance trail."

The Chinle Valley rolled northward from the other side of Defiance plateau to the San Juan River. Quite a stamping ground for a dodging band of renegades.

"Mr. Lucero," the colonel said, a peculiar dryness in his voice, "is well acquainted with the terrain. He will guide you, Cap'n."

"Then we will depart now," Thomas replied.

LUCERO broke in with a protest at such an early start. Trestle had his say, too.

"You have your orders," the colonel said to Thomas. "How you accomplish the mission is up to you."

Thomas saluted smartly, wheeling inside the other office.

"Boots and saddles," Thomas told Lieutenant Greene.

Not in a long time had such a call been given here in the middle of the night. But soon the bugle blared the stirring call to arms. Before the first notes had hardly died away, men poured from quarters. Lights appeared.

Thomas, buckling on side arms, was on the run for the stables. The picket line guards outside rushed the stock in. Everywhere troopers were running.

Thomas rode his dun to the office, and waited stiffly in the saddle, yet he was observing the reporting of men under full equipment.

Greene was relieved and joined his platoon, advancing with Wandrow and Sergeant Herlits to front and center. Orders were given quickly. The lieutenants would remain at the fort. Thomas told Herlits to pick fifty men, dismiss the balance of the company. They would pack ten mules with rations and ammunition for ten days. All remaining weight allowable would be filled with grain for the horses.

Thirty minutes later Thomas led his patrol out of the fort. The two Navajo scouts came up in front to him, but they carefully avoided Lucero who was on a fresh horse. The command went up the small valley north of the fort as the

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heavily timbered plateau became clear against the early morning sky.

"This is the route," Lucero answered when they reached the east-west trail.

Any spies along the western rim of the plateau would be aware at once if a patrol of cavalry should follow the regular trails. Moreover, no band of renegades would fail to post scouts far from their camp, so Thomas sensed Lucero wanted to take this route for his own reasons.

"We continue north," he called.

"This other way is the shortest way," Lucero protested. "If I am to guide you this is the way we go."

"When we reach the Chinle Valley and are approaching this camp of renegades we will follow your directions," Thomas answered in a chilly tone.

Thomas realized that Lucero resented him. Herlits hid a smile when Thomas continued north.

Night would conceal dust clouds of their passage which would be visible in the daylight, and the forest would likely hide them from spies. Nor did Thomas send the scouts out. That would slow them down, and for the next several hours hard riding alone would place them in position for an attack.

Dawn was breaking when they reached the northernmost point of the plateau and came upon a wide, fresh trail. One made by wagons and teams. Thomas lifted his arm in signal to halt for a rest period.

He rode along the trace of the wagons, examining the ground for sign. The vehicles had moved westward the day before. Thomas rode over to Lucero.

"A trader's train?" he asked.

"It must be." The trader shrugged.

"We are now about east of where you saw the renegade Indians?"

"Yes, Cap'n."

"Sergeant Herlits!"

"Yes, sir?" The sergeant was promptly standing beside the dun.

"Tell the men they can munch jerky on the ride. We move out again in ten minutes. I want five men up with me and the scouts. Keep the rest of the patrol behind about one mile."

Indians would watch the dust kicked up by the horses of the main body, not expecting a spearhead well out in front.

IV

LUCERO considered Captain Thomas uneasily when the patrol mounted to proceed west over the trace of the wagon train. In another hour's time they had advanced into the valley of the Chinle.

"Which way to that camp?" Thomas asked Lucero.

The man glanced around, hesitated briefly, and indicated a point just above the west-bound wagon trail.

"There, I think."

Thomas' patrol kept to the rigorous pace, from trot to gallop, and gallop to trot. Lucero kept watch into the west, where the wagon trail would be rolling by now. But they picked up no dust cloud from it.

"Where would those wagons be headed?" the captain asked Lucero finally.

"Mebbe the Hopi towns."

At ten o'clock Thomas slowed the patrol to a walk when, from a rise, he saw the wagons, six of them, just breaking camp. He wondered about that.

Red Tommy returned from the north to report no sign of Indians. Changing course a little to the north, Thomas proceeded at a trot, until well ahead of the laboring wagons. Hosteen Dobahuzsin appeared from the west just after the patrol forded the Chinle wash. He reported briefly in the Navajo language.

"He no see Indians," Red Tommy told Thomas. Lucero's presence appeared to have clammed up the scouts.

"Navajos were never good scouts," Lucero said, disgustedly. "They couldn't sight a barn in bright sunlight ten feet away."

"Well, you tell me. Where was this camp last night?"

"Right on over there," Lucero pointed west.

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"We're over half-way across the valley. You told the colonel it was in the center, and north of where we are now."

"I said no such thing," Lucero denied blandly. "They are still west of us."

"The truth is you didn't go near this hostile camp?"

"I didn't say that," Lucero said, with a suave grin. "I estimated it. In this clear air distances are sometimes deceiving, which you will find out when you are here a little longer, Cap'n."

Thomas' earlier feeling that Lucero was a crafty individual bringing the patrol out for reasons of his own now were full blown. But he did not argue with the man. At noon he halted his patrol in a flat, and told the troopers to boil coffee. Who would see the smoke of the fire?

In the afternoon Thomas split up the patrol, sending troopers off in different directions to seek sign he didn't believe was there. In the middle of the afternoon the command reassembled and went into camp. At dusk the heavily laden wagons rolled up, pulling off to one side. Lucero went over to join the six teamsters.

While the troopers ate, Herlits strolled over to where Thomas sat in the grass. On the sergeant's face was a knowing expression.

"Wild goose chase, Cap'n, sir?" he drawled.

"Maybe we can make it different," Thomas replied. "What galls me is to be used by Lucero. Maybe these New Mexicans think it's funny to get troopers out on any excuse they please."

"Blas Lucero would!"

As Herlits spoke, the man came away from the wagons. Thomas summoned him over.

"Who owns this traders' outfit?" he asked. "It's yours, eh?"

Lucero gave one of his noncommittal shrugs and strode over to where troopers were finishing their evening meal. Others were building fires to ward against the chill after the sun was down

Thomas' anger against Lucero was mounting. He looked at Herlits who was pulling at grass roots.

"Lucero expects Indians on this trip," the sergeant commented, "and fixed up this little deal for the protection of his goods. And tomorrow mornin' he's goin' to try to talk you into goin' with him to the Hopi towns."

Thomas knew that no traders or freighters were allowed to cross this frontier without permission. Invariably an escort was provided to keep them from being set upon, robbed, and perhaps killed. So always the army was willing to provide such protection when possible.

HE WAS deep in thought when a shrill, silly laugh arose in the air. He glanced to where a bunch of troopers were congregated between two fires. That laughter, like that of a man drinking, had come from there. Thomas lifted his eyes and met those of Herlits, who slowly inclined his head. The sergeant, too, knew what that laughter meant.

Thomas stalked over to the group. A saddle blanket had been spread between the fires, and on it Lucero was dealing monte with a pack of Spanish goatskin cards. He heard Thomas and the sergeant too late to conceal a demijohn beneath the skirts of his spread-out black coat.

Thomas lifted the half empty jug, pulled the corn cob stopper and dumped the contents.

"There will be no drinking and no gambling in my camps, Lucero," he snapped. "Is that clear?"

"You insult me?" blustered the New Mexican.

"Get over with your wagons and stay there!" barked Thomas.

Lucero obeyed without further argument. The troopers dispersed. Thomas went over to the edge of the camp, unrolled his blanket and lay down. Talk diminished as the fires died down. Herlits approached and, with the easy assurance of old line sergeants, dropped to the ground beside his captain.

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"You know about this Blas Lucero?" he asked confidentially

"Tell me, Sergeant."

"There's talk from away back," said Herlits. "They say he helped Colonel Kit Carson, and others, especially with captured Navajos, but him and his men never got to Fort Defiance, or to Ojo del Oso with the number he started with. Funny, too, that them as was missin' was always men and girls from sixteen to twenty-five."

"What the devil you trying to tell me?" Thomas sat up, and got out his makings.

"Well, it's been said in New Mexico towns he sold hundreds of slaves. They got 'em in all the pueblos and the ranchos. It's what makes the Navajos fight so hard. And the army just a little more than suspects, because Lucero was almost caught in the act several times, but slipped through some way. Smarter than a weasel, he is."

Thomas had heard rumors of such slaves before, but it had been hard to believe. Now, however, he recalled Colonel Sudhoff's obvious dislike for the man, and wondered. But Herlits was not through. He said Indians in the Navajo country were getting whisky, rifles and ammunition from somebody, although he had no grounds for accusing Lucero directly.

"And now he's pulled a cute trick on us," Herlits growled. "Gettin' this patrol out to see him through an area he's suspicious about. Maybe wantin' to dodge some Navajos he has crooked."

"Well," said Thomas, "Lucero may be a surprised man tomorrow."

The patrol awoke and ate before dawn. The wagon train men, however, did not bestir themselves until sunup. They were around their one campfire when Thomas approached them with Herlits and ten armed troopers.

"Who has the permit for this train to enter this No-man's-land?" Thomas demanded.

Eyes turned promptly on Lucero, whose own eyes blazed at being pointed out as the boss.

"I do not need a permit," Lucero replied. "I come and go through this country as I please. The army knows this."

"Disarm him," Thomas ordered.

Lucero and the other men were relieved of weapons. Short guns and knives were tossed into a pile. Lucero's fury showed in his blazing eyes.

"You dare not molest me, Cap'n," he warned. "You will pay for this insult!"

Thomas shrugged, and ordered the troopers:

"Hold them under arrest. Sergeant, come with me."

They headed for the end wagons which had been drawn up in pairs. The teams were still grazing. Bows supporting gray sheets, tied at the ends, covered each wagon. Unfastening the first, Thomas climbed up over the tail board. Herlits hung on while he investigated.

BENEATH a few sacks of corn and some dry goods, kegs of whisky filled the entire wagon bed. It was the same with every wagon. But there were no arms. Thomas' jaw was set grimly. There was, he figured, enough firewater in this freight outfit to dispatch several tribes on the war path.

Lucero tried to pull away from the troopers, calling,

"One moment! I want to speak with you privately."

"Stay where you are," Thomas snapped, and stalked up to him. "Who is that whisky for?"

Lucero replied, "It's my property, and I'm warning you—"

"Shut up!" Thomas told him. "Sergeant, take a detail of men and set every wagon in the train afire."

Herlits saluted snappily. "Yes, *sir!*"

Within minutes every wagon was on fire. When the kegs broke apart the flames leaped higher and more brilliantly. Lucero was jabbering incoherently about base betrayal. Thomas laughed at him.

"We are in the field," he reminded,

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"where I am authorized to take summary action."

"You destroy my property—my wagons!"

"Which have been hauling contraband! Not to mention entering this No-Man's-Land without permission or escort. Providing whisky for Indians is a despicable crime. Especially with this tribe that is at war with the Army of the United States. Your property has been confiscated and destroyed. You and your men will be taken to Fort Defiance under guard."

Thomas' orders to the detail were explicit. Any who attempted to escape were to be promptly shot.

A note to Colonel Sudhoff briefly reported the action taken.

The reduced patrol was then mounted, and on the march. Thomas shifted their general course into the northwest, placing the scouts out. They emerged from Chinle Valley at noon with the purple of Black Mountain in the distance.

An hour after the noon halt the scouts raced in to report they had cut the trail of a bunch of renegades.

"They go northeastward," Red Tommy reported. "I think they make around the Lukachukais, maybe raid Colorado, or toward Sante Fe."

Thomas mounted the patrol in short order. The trail they finally reached was wide. Perhaps a hundred men or more had passed through the night before. Lucero could not have seen these men anywhere in this region two days before. The trace of the moving band struck the upper Chinle Valley, and when night prevented tracking, the patrol camped within half a mile of the foot of the Lukachukais.

Tonight there was no cooking fire. Thomas ordered silence. Red Tommy disappeared in the general direction of the raiders. Hosteen Dobahuzsin climbed to the summit of the mountain. It was dawn before Dobahuzsin returned.

[*Turn page*]

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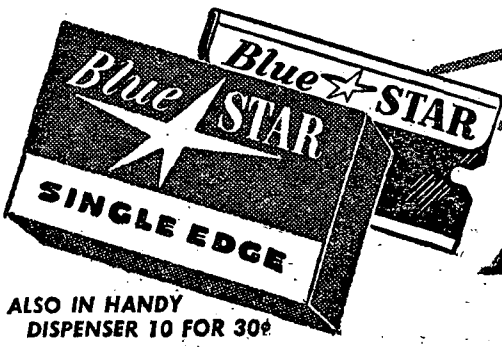

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"At sun"—he indicated the eastern horizon—"one fire smoke. One bugle." He pointed into the northeast. "Soldier bugle. Long way. Very far." The faint notes of the bugle he had heard probably had been sounding reveille.

"I've heard of no patrols out," Thomas said thoughtfully.

"If old Dobahuzsin says he heard a bugle," Herlits put in, "why he heard one, sir."

"How far could he hear it?"

"Well—" Herlits considered. "He was up high, and through this thin, cool air of mornin' he could hear a considerable distance."

Thomas did not ride to investigate. He would try the renegades' trail a little longer. Then, toward noon, they saw Red Tommy, silhouetted against the sky on a hillock. He raised an arm in signal.

"He catch," Dobahuzsin offered.

RED TOMMY looked worn out when they reached him, yet he could still grin.

"I got near their bed ground," he reported. "A scout come in and whole bunch lit out, north. Before dawn they see the soldiers camp, and turn west. I come for you."

"Dobahuzsin said he heard a bugle."

"Yes, they been camped maybe two days up here. Lots of foot soldiers. No much riders."

As the patrol rode north the terrain grew more hilly and mountainous near the border of New Mexico. Not far now would be the Four Corners, where as many territories and states had a common axis point.

Thomas rode with Herlits onto a bench at the base of a butte, overlooking a dry flat filled with foot high grass. In the center of it sprawled a temporary camp. A full company of infantry surely, with baggage animals and apparently a platoon of cavalry, but with just one white tent. Before it a small flag flapped on a short pole.

"A general along!" Herlits cried. "Never seen or heard of one chasin' Indians before!"

"There is only one general in the Southwest," Thomas said. "Carleton!"

Soldiers appeared to watch them gallop in. A couple of officers approached the tent, then General Carleton stepped into the sunlight. Thomas reined to a halt and dismounted, coming to a salute.

The general stepped forward.

"Captain Thomas! What brings you so far north of Fort Defiance?"

"Chasing Indians, sir."

"Why"—the general frowned in annoyance—"we haven't seen a single one since we have been here!"

"You have just come from Albuquerque, sir?"

"Straight west through Jemez Pass. Returning this afternoon. Tired of Albuquerque, so I came along on this training expedition. You say you are following Indians?"

"Yes, sir. A band on the way out to raid somewhere. Followed them from west of the Chinle. Their scouts found your camp last night, and they all fled west."

"By Joe!" the general cried, pleased that a patrol finally was harrying the redskins determinedly. The abuse and complaints heaped on the small force in the Southwest had angered him.

Thomas went into details of the pursuit and told about Lucero, and the burning of his wagons.

"So we've finally got this conniving, thieving Lucero?" General Carleton exclaimed. "Your action is not only commended, Captain, but I want you to give Colonel Sudhoff an order from me. Lucero and all six of his hirelings are to be sent to Albuquerque under strong guard. Send five of your men as witnesses. Make a deposition yourself, for I want you to remain in the field along this dangerous section of No-Man's-Land."

"Yes, sir."

"Dismount your patrol and rest them. We'll talk."

"Sir, we are close behind this large hostile band," objected Thomas. "I would like to continue the pursuit before they

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put too much distance between us."

"Ha!" The general's face wreathed in smiles. "That is the way for a field officer to talk, Captain! You shall have your wish. I will not detain you. However, I'll be back in Albuquerque long before you come off this patrol. Forward my order to Colonel Sudhoff by special messenger if you find it necessary."

He walked with Thomas back to his horse, continuing to discuss Lucero. Thomas listened politely as General Carleton repeated the stories Herlits already had told him. The general added that the army was also certain now besides peddling arms and bad whisky, Lucero sold information. In addition, circumstantial evidence warranted the conclusion he had planned at least two Navajo raids on New Mexican towns deep inside the territory. Certainly someone had who knew the area well. The knowledge of entering and departing along the best routes, ability to keep under cover, had not come inadverently even for the cunning Navajos.

"I would prefer having Lucero on a killing, robbery, or slave charge," the general admitted. "Yet with the evidence you have against him as a thief I can send him away for a good many years. He'll sleep behind bars to keep him from further machinations. . . . So long, Captain Thomas, and my best wishes for continuance of a successful patrol!"

He shook hands again. Thomas saluted, and vaulted into saddle.

His arm flashed in the air, and with the signaled command he led his patrol west. Before they were far a bugle sounded to the rear, and when he glanced back the training expedition was breaking camp.

V

NAVAJOS had sent spies up on the butte to examine the soldiers' camp. Behind it their main trail cut back. But Thomas did not believe they would continue in that direction. Such was their contempt for the soldiers' fighting ability he suspected they would eventually go around them to carry out their original plans.

During a short rest period he summoned Herlits and the two scouts, and told them what he thought. Dobahuzsin began to speak rapidly in Navajo, using his fingers for emphasis.

"He say you are right," Red Tommy interpreted. "Little ways from here they will circle back onto the Lukachukais. Hide in the forest there. Watch. No soldiers come tomorrow night, they go on to where they started for."

"If we passed along the east side of the Lukachukais, their scouts will believe we are returning to Fort Defiance?"

Dobahuzsin studied the captain, his black eyes gleaming. He spoke shortly and swung up to his moccasined feet.

"He say you smart warrior, Cap'n," Red Tommy reported. "He say we go catch them now."

Thomas kept the patrol at a fast pace until the crest of the Lukachukai range lifted above them. There the patrol slowed. Troopers lounged in saddles, giving the appearance of men who were homeward bound, who would make one more night camp. At dusk the patrol halted, ate a meal and fed their horses. Before moonrise, they were on the mountain.

In the timber Thomas dropped back to see if all loose accouterments were tied down, to avoid noise. Herlits had anticipated him.

"Good going, Sergeant," Thomas approved, and returned to the head of a column of threes.

The moon came up, and the stars were bright in the high altitude. A good night for attack provided the Navajos could be found. Thomas reasoned the raiding band would be in the final half mile of the timber. He sent Red Tommy to check.

After hours of slow progress the patrol was halted and dismounted. Thomas threw himself flat on the ground to rest,

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remembering another night when he had lain wearily on the ground near Gettysburg waiting for the attack. But the timber had not been like this, which was pine and piñon.

The low insistent hoot of an owl sounded from the north. Red Tommy promptly awoke, sat up. When the owl hooted again, Red Tommy gave the female bird's purring reply. Then out of the gloom of the forest appeared Dobahuzsin, leading his mustang.

He reported that the band of renegades was sleeping in a clearing just about where Captain Thomas had reasoned they would be. In the moonlight, the old scout, using a stick, made a rough map of the spot.

"They are the fighting men of Black Wind and Muddy Waters," he said. "Both are with them."

"Muddy Waters failed to learn his lesson at Fort Sumner!" Thomas said grimly, and Herlits nodded.

The troopers were all stirring now, alert. Thomas selected ten men, telling them to follow Red Tommy around a corner of the clearing and try to run off the Indians' stock. A similar number would hold back from the fight with the pack-mules. Herlits, with half of the remaining patrol, was directed to slip around to attack from the opposite direction.

They moved out, soon reaching the vicinity of the clearing, not far away. Thomas halted under cover, and waited The men detailed to rush the horses drifted silently through the shadows. Herlits swung his men from view.

Thomas dismounted to look into the clearing from some jack pines. There was no smell of smoke in the cool air. Nor were the sleeping Navajos easy to find. Rolled in their robes, scattered widely in the grass, they blended well with the ground.

WHEN a short babbling cry echoed alarmingly on the far side of the clearing, not a man leaped to his feet. Yet there was swift movement as Navajos came awake, raising heads slightly, hands stealing to arms beside them. On the heels of the first warning came two others. The sentinels came running into the camp. They had discovered Herlits.

The camp sprang into immediate action, with little sound, ready to run or fight. Thomas ran for his horse.

"Bugler, sound the charge!" he ordered. "Detail, attack with short guns!"

The command was still echoing in the air when the strident blare of the bugle swept through the timber. Thomas led his men through the last stand, plunging into the clearing at red men running toward where their horses grazed.

A volley of shots rang out, then the soldiers were in, shooting and riding the Indians down. As near as such men could be surprised into panic, those renegades were. They had reached the edge of the forest before they turned, trying to hold off the troopers. Then suddenly Herlits and his men appeared there, firing fast. The attack drove the Navajos in the direction of the detail with Red Tommy, who had not got near the riding stock. They opened a withering fire.

Thomas reformed his own detail, charging as skirmishers in a spread line. With no further attempt to fight, the Navajos dissolved without much noise into nothing.

Thomas concealed his astonishment as his men came in to regroup. This was a surprising enemy, well-ordered even when routed. One minute he was there, the next he was gone. The Navajos had left eleven dead behind, but no wounded. Also, every horse in the remuda was gone with the Navajos. In less than five minutes they had escaped what should have been a massacre.

But if the captain was disappointed, the troopers were jubilant. Their elation over the outcome of the fight jarred Thomas. Still he did not make the mistake of considering them inexperienced, over-enthused by partial success. For his eyes had just been opened to the realization that in Navajo warfare it

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was a feat to enter one of the camps of their warriors and drop eleven dead in their tracks. Only because the leaders had been completely outmaneuvered had it been possible even here. And they would not be so careless again.

Surprisingly, only one trooper had sustained a wound. A mere scratch. The patrol piled off the mountain. The Navajos had run for all the possible escape points, but they would come together again once clear of pursuit. It was the opinion of the two scouts that Black Wind and Muddy Waters, believing the patrol would pursue them, might flee as far as Black Mountain. It depended, Thomas gathered, on how big a scare had been thrown into them by the amazing fact that their secret camp had been charged by troopers.

Much depended on not letting them gain too much of a lead. Yet there was no possibility of following one of the numerous trails of individual members of the band, or small groups. The scouts were dispatched with the understanding that Thomas would now ride as fast as possible westward, halting only after daylight.

He led the troopers at full speed through the arid ranges over the Chinle under the light of the stars. They covered miles that went by under slashing, iron-shod hoofs. At daylight, Thomas pulled over into a ravine for cover, for they were now well out in open country, the timber of Black Mountain appearing as a dark line in the new day. Horses were rubbed down dry, after being unloaded, and permitted to graze under guard.

By mid-morning the scouts were back. Dobahuzsin reported that the Navajo renegades had lost time by slowly coming together. They were now above Oraibi, traveling over the flat mesa that some miles further west became Black Mountain.

Apparently believing that the audacious troopers could not overhaul them now, they were traveling at reduced speed.

THOMAS, faced with losing more ground to them, or giving his pursuit away in the open country, debated briefly. The scouts were dispatched to pick out low ground, ravines, rocky stretches and sagebrush flats. This slowed the troopers because they lost time by deviating from a straight course. It did give them a chance to lessen the widely separating gap.

Looking his patrol over, the captain got confident grins from quiet, tired men. So on they went, moving steadily after fleeing Indians. After an hour by sun, Dobahuzsin dropped back to say they were north of the ancient walled pueblo of Oraibi, where the renegades were when he last observed them.

The scout led the detail to a scum-surfaced water-hole. The stock was taken there, then allowed to graze, since the grain was gone.

Men rested and ate. Then by the light of the stars, the indefatigable Thomas urged them on. No attempt was made to follow the course of the Navajo band. Once more Thomas drove straight west at all speed possible without killing the stock.

At midnight two horses had thrown a shoe each. Now came the worth of the captain's wisdom in having the troopers carrying extra shoes. Reshoeing those horses put them into the running again. No lame stock could keep up the grueling chase.

Thomas banked on getting ahead of the renegades, permitting them to ride to meet him. By dawn the patrol was in the timber of the far side of the mountain. The troops were dismounted. Thomas went out with the scouts to reconnoiter.

Dobahuzsin pointed a long finger at the gash of Blue Canyon. A smudge of smoke hovered in the air. Cooking fires of a large party believing no danger existed in the region. This was all to the good, and Thomas held the advantage.

"Maybe two hours yet before they come," Red Tommy said, and showed Thomas the mark of the regular west-

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ward trail across the mountain, pointing to where it entered the forest.

Retiring to the patrol, Thomas ate dry provisions. They again watered at a small, dug-out spring, in relays. The men slept fitfully, knowing there would be action before noon.

Red Tommy and Dobahuzsin slept wherever they fell to the ground. Yet one of them was always going out to check on progress of the band of renegades. More than two hours elapsed before Dobahuzsin touched Thomas on the arm.

"They come, now," he said.

Herlits sprang to his feet, shaking up the troopers to their saddles. Thomas went out with the scouts, seeing a double line of dark riders about a mile off against the blue sky. They were not as picturesque as the Plains Indians, in their short, tight-fitting war caps of rawhide. Most carried rifles or carbines and not a few held lances. They wore dark gray trousers, but were bare above the waist. Those with robes carried them over the back of odd looking square saddles without horns.

Dobahuzsin went along warning caution. No tracks must be left near the trail. Thomas grinned at the old scout, and returned to the patrol.

Instructions were brief. Herlits was to remain with half the troopers, Thomas taking the other half to the rim of the mountain from which they could see over a great rolling valley of canyons.

Well back from trail, they dismounted in the timber. This would be no battle such as Thomas had known in Virginia and Maryland. This morning's skirmish would be strictly an ambush, dictated by special tactics due to the terrain.

The Navajo party was not long in coming. But the leader was not Muddy Waters. Red Tommy shook his head. He could not see Black Wind, either. The renegades came at a trot, unaware of death lurking.

Down the trail, the clear notes of the bugle broke on the air. The Indian ponies halted as by magic. Thomas read the disbelief on dusky faces in that one breath before all was confusion and racing horses.

He gave the order to fire. From the other side also burst the deafening thunder of guns. Both ends of the trail were closed. That hurled Indians back. Men and horses screamed and died. Guns kept on roaring and mounted Navajos suddenly erupted in every direction, as they had on the Lukachukai mountain.

THEY came, shooting wildly, striking with lances, pounding a shaking thunder on the ground. They rode through the troopers like will-o'-the-wisps and were gone. The gunfire died away. Thomas stared at the gory scene.

Ponies and dead Indians lay on the ground. If the Lukachukai affair had been a victory, this was a decisive triumph. Yet Thomas had the feeling that this was not even a moral victory. It was only the beginning of a death struggle on a greater scale.

Dobahuzsin came up beside him as he moved north of the trail. His black eyes searched Thomas' face.

"They gone like the wind," he said. "No catch now. Each is a rabbit running for a hole to hide in."

Thomas nodded wearily. He did not intend to rush his worn patrol into useless individual pursuits. He gave orders to ride through the heavy timber to where there was good grass and water.

That afternoon while the troopers rested, Red Tommy drove a big ox into camp.

"See old brand?" he asked. "Navajo. New brand—Hopi who stole cattles from the Navajo. We eat him!"

Around glowing campfires the troopers bivouacked and roasted tough beef. Yet it was meat, and fresh.

Men and stock were recuperating rapidly from the grueling pursuit. The wounded were negligible. No dead. It hadn't been that kind of fight.

The next day at noon Dobahuzsin

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took Thomas to the high west rim. From a high, white-walled mesa across the panorama country filled with canyons, thin columns of smoke lifted in the air.

"Make talk," Dobahuzsin explained. "Tonight they meet. Tomorrow, they come."

"Then we make more dead ones," Thomas replied.

Dobahuzsin's eyes went blank. Red Tommy repeated his meaning. The old scout shook his head dolefully.

"Too many. We be the dead ones."

"How many?" Thomas asked.

"Five—six hundred. Maybe more. Boys. Young men. Old men. All come to fight."

So, Thomas thought bitterly, he was to be forced out of the country after slashing through almost to the Navajo homeland.

"More better we go," Dobahuzsin insisted. "We not enough soldiers."

The patrol had not been intended for an extensive pursuit, nor to push so deep into hostile country. Without reserves and supply Thomas could only withdraw, but it seemed like retreat to him. Still the men were satisfied their sweep was one glorious success.

In the afternoon, the patrol descended Black Mountain. Near a muddy red lake in the blue and gray-banded walls of Blue Canyon they camped. Thomas was taking the opportunity to become acquainted with the domain where he was sure that before long he would be fighting again.

The patrol moved leisurely, intending to pass through the Hopi villages. When night approached they were in rolling sand hills, bear grass and yellowish sage. Thomas was considering a small low mesa as a likely bivouac for the night when Dobahuzsin and Red Tommy, who had been out most of the day loitering along the back trail, rode in.

"Bad, very bad," declared the old scout. "No sign of Navajos. They are around us. When no see Navajos, very bad business." He shook his head in gloom.

It was said Navajos rarely attacked in the early night. They preferred the hours just before dawn. But when Thomas had spread his camp to protect his stock, and checked the guards, he lay down fully clothed, only dozing occasionally.

As the dawn approached he became restless. Lighting a smoke he sat up in the fading light of the stars. Clouds scurried over the high country with increased winds. This usually occurred about an hour before the eastern sky faded from gray into gold.

Without sound, Red Tommy crawled to his side. He whispered almost too low to be heard;

"Navajos!"

"They are coming?" Thomas leaned toward him.

"Here," Red Tommy replied, and Thomas realized there was no amusement in his voice now, but fright.

Red Tommy was a brave man, yet in this moment he was scared.

VI

WERE Navajos already here? Thomas lifted his head staring first at the outer edges of the mesa, then pulling his searching gaze closer to the straggled camp. Red Tommy must mean they were below, crawling up the mesa walls, getting ready to rush.

Sheer instinct told him that events were rushing headlong toward a thundering climax, but still he could perceive no tangible dangers. Nevertheless he *knew* that an engagement was at hand.

Then he saw why Red Tommy was scared. A part of the ground not twenty feet away shifted toward a squad of slumbering men—a ghost patch of night shadow that became a half-naked man, a long-bladed knife clutched between his teeth. And Thomas realized he was seeing with his own eyes the beginning of one of those feared dawn suicide attacks of the Navajo.

Herlits lay on his back an arm's length away. Beyond him, the bugler.

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Thomas cautiously reached a hand toward the sergeant's head—and dropped it. Herlits was fully awake, his eyes wide open, staring at him.

Slowly Herlits reached for the bugler's face, touched him, and spoke the barest whisper. But it carried on the morning wind, told keen ears of discovery.

There came the bubbling sing-song of a coyote from nowhere, yet from everywhere on the mesa top. A weird, frightening sound.

Thomas came up on his knees, his long-barreled six-gun ready. And in that moment the air was filled with a horrible, blood-chilling long cry. It echoed and re-echoed—the fearsome war cry of Navajo warriors leaping in for the kill. Thomas had faced Rebels with their battle cries, the fierce war whoops of the long-legged Texans that momentarily paralyzed soldiers from city streets. But those Rebel yells were nothing to this.

Here was swift death. Instant death. Thomas was up, firing as the bugle blared, hurling the call to arms too late.

The Navajo war cry was silenced now. In its place came the curious silence of Navajo fighting men of Lukachukai and Black Mountain. Only the bugle, the noise of struggling men, of crashing guns echoed from the cliff walls in all their terror.

There was no time to organize, as Thomas found himself surrounded. He emptied his gun, hurled it into the stark face of a savage Navajo and whirled to evade the thrust of a stabbing lance. He fell over a dead man, but leaped up with a rifle in his hands. He brought it down to brain a lean, lithe redman swooping in with a knife. It didn't miss altogether, slashing his sleeve and bringing a trickle of blood.

Thomas shot a glance around, certain he would see disaster. He breathed quick relief when he saw that the troopers were in small units, behind rocks, in low ground, or standing up fighting the Indians. Nor had the attackers been able to break through the horse guards.

Taking swift hope, Thomas grabbed his pistol, reloaded and got back into the mortal combat. With six men he broke through to the outer edge of the mesa. Rapidly he pressed against the Navajos, realigning his men. What was within inches of being a rout began to turn, a fact quickly realized by attackers.

From the edge of the mesa a sharp, hooting cry lifted above the noises made by furious struggling men. It was repeated closer in. The attack neither dissolved, nor retreated in disorder. The knife and lance wielders simply fell away, filtering through the darkness. Riflemen were left between them and the troopers, who covered the gradual withdrawal.

The troopers pressed forward, with Thomas out before them. But there was not enough of them, nor were they able to pursue far. The chase ended at the head of the trail down which the last of the Navajos withdrew.

In the eastern sky bars of yellow and gold shone between the clouds. Dawn had come.

THOMAS couldn't believe it when he looked around to count the enemy dead. Not one body was on the field. The retreating Navajo had taken all their dead and wounded with them.

"That's their way, when it's possible." Herlits told him. The sergeant had two wounds in his shoulders. "And when they jump in force like they did this mornin,' they can do it."

There were seven dead troopers. Not a single man without at least a minor wound.

After sunup graves were dug. Thomas took a thin, battered Testament from his tunic pocket. He stood with head bared, reading the burial service. Then the graves were filled and heaped with rocks to keep wild animals from digging up the bodies.

It was afternoon before they could get on to Oraibi. Thomas was mostly silent, because of new and conclusive

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knowledge that had so forcibly come to him. Now he knew why the Southwesterners spoke of Navajo fighters with respect. Had he and Red Tommy not been awake, there would have been a massacre. By that slim margin had the Navajos failed to wipe out the entire patrol.

To his dying day Thomas would remember their blood-curdling war cry.

Reaching Oraibi, Thomas rested his patrol for three days. Then going on leisurely, when they passed around Chimpovy and camped for a week at some springs. Thomas bought corn from the Hopis for his stock, and replenished the food supply with vegetables and fresh meat. Before they got back to the fort they also made halts at Corn Wash and Rough Rock.

"You are known from one length of this country to the other," Red Tommy told him. "The wild ones want none of you. And they won't attack unless they've got a great bunch like there was on the mesa."

The scouts, who visited some of the less warlike Navajos hiding in the region, told more to Herlits. The sergeant sought Thomas with a woebegone expression.

"Blas Lucero was at Salina Springs three days ago they say. If the detail got him to the fort and he was put in the guard house, how could this be?"

"Escaped on the way?" hazarded Thomas.

Herlits didn't know, but he doubted if any prisoners got away from that specially picked guard of troopers

Their first glimpse of the fort the next day brought amazement. On the west side of the fort was a fortress of white tents and everywhere infantrymen and troopers were working. Men for the projected campaign had arrived.

Thomas took his patrol in, saluting the colors from the sally port. He instructed Herlits to put his stock away and take all the wounded to the post surgeon. Tired, his clothing tattered and dirty, he crossed the plaza to the office. Before it smartly dressed orderlies waited. Officers unknown to him, including a colonel of engineers, were grouped around. They stared at him.

Greene and Wandrow were in the front office with most of the former post officers. The faces of the two lighted up, only to go blank as instantly.

"Colonel Sudhoff in?" Thomas asked Greene.

BEFORE the lieutenant could reply Major Trestle appeared in the door of the colonel's office. His eyes became twin sparks of hatred as they fell on Thomas.

"So you're back! Come in here."

Thomas entered the room.

"You are under arrest, and confined to your quarters, Captain Thomas!" the major sneered at him.

"What are the charges, sir?"

"Do you think you can destroy the property of a respectable citizen of New Mexico, manhandle and send him in under false arrest, without there being consequences?"

"So he is out of jail? We heard so on the way in."

"Certainly! What a fury would have been around our ears except for my judgment and rectification of the matter. Mr. Lucero, an estimable gentleman of wide repute, was greatly incensed, thanks to your unutterable stupidity!"

"Convinced you that he was a respectable citizen, did he, and talked himself out of jail?"

"Captain I am quite capable of making my own decisions. The facts were apparent, once he was permitted to tell his story. Go to your quarters until further orders."

"Where is Colonel Sudhoff?"

Major Trestle colored. "The colonel's whereabouts are of no concern of yours. Anyway, he will confirm my decision!"

"Maybe General Carleton won't."

"General Carleton won't dare dismiss the charges against you, since I made them personally!" Deep satisfaction showed in the major's fat face.

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THOUGH it hurt, Thomas brought his hand up in salute, about faced and left the room with a wooden expression. Major Trestle followed him.

"Captain Thomas has been confined to quarters, relieved of all duty," he informed the officers in the other room.

Thomas walked on, not bothering to produce his field report. In his room he found that it had been recently swept, furnished with clean linen, and a pitcher of fresh water stood on the washstand.

Stripping, Thomas sponged off. Dressed in clean clothing, he had finished shaving when Herlits entered. He closed the door, his homely face dark with suppressed anger.

"You'd better beat it, Sergeant," Thomas told him. "I'm under arrest."

"You know what happened?" Herlits blurted. "Colonel Sudhoff had just left the fort when the boys brought Lucero in. Major Trestle didn't lock any of 'em up. He let that crooked whisky runner talk himself out of all charges, and Lucero was gone before sundown. With apologies from the Army. You wait until the colonel gets back!"

"Why is he gone?"

"He was called to Albuquerque with all the other fort commandants to plan this campaign into the Navajo country. He should of been back today, so the boys say. And oh, yes! Word of our doin's has been driftin' in here. Every time the major heard we'd whipped some more Indians, he nigh threw a fit!"

"Sergeant, you beat it before you're caught with me. Major Trestle holds his hate above the army's good, it appears."

"Could be. He's done had a run-in with the colonel of engineers, who's making the improvements around Fort Defiance with the infantry. Good day, sir. I bet General Carleton is goin' to be put out when he learns he's lost Blas Lucero!"

Herlits departed. Thomas lay down to rest, and the afternoon wore away. When a mess man entered with a meal on a tray, Thomas arose and lit the lamp. The man retired, only to return with a small wooden table. He grinned at Thomas.

"So you're an Injun fighter, sir?"

Thomas glanced at him sharply. This friendly attitude after most of the enlisted men labeled him a disciplarian, meant a complete about-face. Thomas could guess his men were talking loud and long.

"Well, we did the best we could," he unbent to say.

As he ate men and horses were constantly coming and going from inside the fort. Thomas paid them no attention, and knew the colonel had returned only when the officer of the day, the infantry first lieutenant, came to his room.

"You're out from under confinement, Captain," the lieutenant informed. "Colonel Sudhoff is back, and that was his first act."

"I'd like to see him!"

"That is why I'm here—to get you. Don't mind saying I'm glad it has turned out this way. That Major Trestle—"

The porch and the front office were so jammed Thomas had to force his way through. Greene stuck out a hand and welcomed him with praise.

"How about taking some of the rest of us along next time?" he asked. "That must have been some fight!"

"You lost nothing by being here," Thomas assured him.

COLONEL SUDHOFF sat behind the field desk, his browned face blank. Major Trestle was walking the floor, throwing his arms and protesting vehemently.

"Never mind," the colonel told him wearily. "How are you, Captain Thomas? Your field dispatch book was turned in by Sergeant Herlits. It would seem—" the colonel smiled—"you gave the Navajos quite a whipping. We'll send for the bodies of the men you lost."

"Colonel," Trestle interrupted, "I must insist on the justness of my stand. Are you aware sir, of the policies in Washington regarding the Western frontier?

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I don't think so, and I have recently come from there. This captain—this man—should be tried by a general court!"

"General Carleton knows about the seizure of the wagons loaded with whisky, and about Lucero's arrest," the colonel said tiredly. "He personally gave the captain orders relating to Lucero."

"That does not alter the situation."

"It will, when General Carleton hears how he's lost Lucero. Are you aware of the enormity of your act, major? You have freed a whisky and arms runner the army has been trying to put behind bars for a long time!"

"A citizen of New Mexico, I insist, has certain rights. Therefore, in line with recent policies in Washington—"

"Plague take your Washington policies!" the colonel roared, at last unable to keep his temper.

"You will have to listen," Major Trestle assured him sauvely, "These policies have the approval of political powers, by which I am favored, and—"

"You let me do the worrying," Colonel Sudhoff broke in. He reached for a stack of papers in a pigeon-hole.

But Major Trestle was going to be heard.

"I shall be forced to expand the charges against Captain Thomas!"

"Now, isn't that fine?" The colonel's eyes bored into the major. "Meanwhile, and as of this moment, you are relieved of all duties here. With the earliest despatch to Albuquerque I am transferring you to headquarters for summary action. Charges will be made by *me*. Is that clear, or do you need it written out?"

Major Trestle was astounded. As it percolated his brain, with attending consequences, his fiery eyes went to Thomas, and in them was mirrored his full hate.

" I ask you not to be hasty, in this matter Colonel," he got out, his voice brittle. "Dismiss this officer. I have matters to discuss with you in connection with the Lucero affair better not mention before a junior officer."

"A junior officer, did you say?" the colonel asked, an odd note sounding in his voice as he turned to Thomas. "I picked up orders of all kinds at headquarters, Captain. One was your permanent commission as a major in the United States army, forwarded from the War Department via Gen. Carleton."

The colonel fished out a document and handed it over.

Thomas was not too surprised because he had had some advance notice of a promotion in rank. But Trestle was completely flabbergasted. He himself held only a war-time commission. This permanent one of Thomas' reversed their seniority.

Colonel Sudhoff obviously was amused by Trestle's reaction to the news.

"For the purpose of the campaign coming up," the colonel drawled to Thomas, "General Carleton sees fit to brevet you a lieutenant colonel."

"Yes, sir," managed Thomas, who this time *was* surprised.

"I know you're tired," the colonel added, "so you may retire. Tomorrow we will go over instructions, and study plans for the campaign in the Navajo country."

"Good night, sir!" Thomas saluted and went out.

When he reached the edge of the plaza, he noticed a light from the window in the Sudhoff place. He hesitated, thinking of Kara. On sudden impulse he crossed the plaza in the blue night, turning up before the Sudhoffs' quarters. His knock brought an invitation to enter. He stepped over the threshold, closing the door, and gazing across the small room at Kara who was sitting under the rays of the lamp on a table. A piece of dress goods was spread across her knees.

"I was wondering if you would come," she said.

VII

CAPTAIN — now Colonel — Thomas studied Kara's lovely face. She did not look much like the colonel. Although her father was calm, gentle, and im-

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perturbable, her beauty, the sureness of her ways, must have come from her mother.

She smiled, asking him to take a chair.

"I hear you were quite successful in the field," she said gently. "I know there is no longer any doubt of your ability."

"Perhaps," he hedged. "We lost seven men, though we killed several times that many Indians."

"Navajos!" He saw that her eyes were inscrutable. She went on sadly, "Too bad this has to happen. The Navajos are a friendly, peace-loving people. It's the renegade leaders who are pushing them into trouble. And they are egged on by men like Blas Lucero who enrich themselves at their expense. The pity of it all!"

Remembering the Navajo in her, he could realize her sorrow.

"Did you have a pleasant time on your trip to Albuquerque?" he asked, to change the subject.

Her rare smile came back.

"I lived there most of my life, you know," she answered. "I didn't see much of Father, since he was busy at headquarters. Most of my days there were spent with friends."

"Your father was in business there before the war?"

She nodded. "We still own a hotel there, and three stores."

Thomas almost grinned. Colonel Sudhoff, he thought, would be at home behind a mercantile counter. She became serious. I picked up a piece of news relayed from headquarters."

"A lot of it is coming out of there, so I hear."

"How well did you know the Trestle's elsewhere?" she asked abruptly.

That startled Thomas. But he smiled.

"Major Trestle not at all. You must mean Mary Ann and her father, Senator Zartmann. Well, that is water under the bridge."

"Then you won't mind hearing a bit of scandal?" she said. "It seems Major Trestle was a procurement officer in Washington. There was an investigation disclosing a huge swindle in uniforms and Major Trestle was implicated. The contracts passed through his hands, so he was arrested."

"Ah!" Thomas breathed deeply. "Then he didn't just manage to get a job out here to get far from the firing line in case General Grant threw every available man into the line to end the war in one quick smash of Lee's forces?"

"No."

"The rest I can surmise," he told her solemly. "He was ordered to stand trial. In popped Senator Zartmann with his political influence. So, Trestle wound up in the far west. Right?"

She stood up, nodding, and said, "I found a few lemons in Albuquerque. Would you like lemonade and a piece of freshly baked cake?"

"I cannot imagine such luxury after returning from a jaunt where we even ate parched corn by robbing the mules of it. . . ."

IN THE meantime Red Tommy had gone over to a jacal in Crystal Pass, where he had distant kinsmen. He returned immediately to see Herlits, and was sent out again. Herlits sought Thomas right after breakfast.

"Blas Lucero went into the Navajo country two days ago," Herlits reported. "Took five men with him. Red Tommy couldn't find out where, but it wasn't to the Hopi towns. I sent Tommy back."

"Select a dozen men to stay prepared to ride on five minutes notice," Thomas instructed. "Sergeant, the instant we can find out where to head Lucero off, we'll go."

"Yes, sir, colonel!" Harlets said, and grinned as he used the new title. He had known of the promotion, in the way of sergeants the world over, before Thomas had known himself.

On the appointed day for the campaign to begin, a column from Ojo del Oso would arrive to go in on the south. Through Jemez Pass a second would plunge through in the north.

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While the infantry blocked exit to the eastward into New Mexico, the two columns would pinch off all the way to the Hopi towns, and sweep before them.

Thomas, with a special column, would proceed to the wild Navajo Mountain, clean out the canyons there and push toward Black Mountain. By then, the other columns would have completed sweeping the vaunted impregnability of the Navajo homeland.

"There were no spare officers with field experience in Albuquerque," the colonel told Thomas. "Promote some more men to sergeants and turn your platoons and sections over to them, under Greene and Wandrow. Company F, camped across the wash, is up to full strength in all ranks and noncommissioned grades."

Thomas took his two lieutenants over to Company F, where they discussed the campaign with Captain Yarden, a New Mexico cowman with experience fighting Apaches in the southern part of the territory, and a glum, taciturn Scotsman. We takin' supplies in wagons or by pack?" he wanted to know.

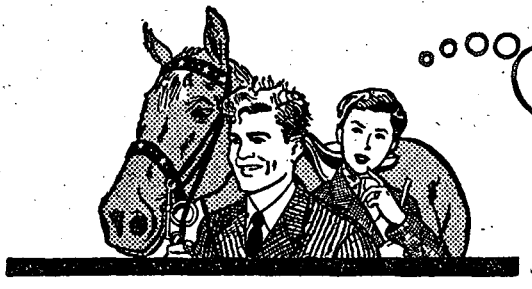
It was the opinion of Thomas who had made a study of the maps of the country that wagons would not get beyond a place called Redlake, near the white-walled mesa close to the escarpment of Black Mountain.

"Packs," he decided promptly. "Which means extra men along to handle them, but mobility is desirable there."

Captain Yarden was given the task of assembling the train. In addition, a detachment from the Signal Corps would erect and handle the heliograph station on Navajo mountain.

However busy Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas was, however, he still had hopes of overhauling Lucero, though they were dimming as days of inaction went by. By now the whisky runner could have come out of the forbidden country and returned with more contraband.

[Turn page]



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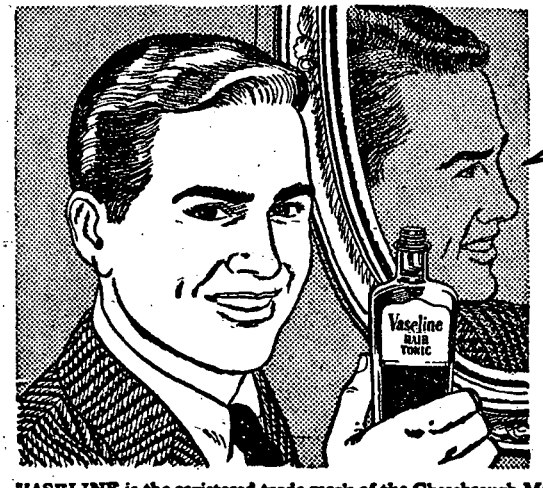

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Riding out alone one afternoon up the valley beyond the fort, on the trail above him he observed two riders regarding him. At first he did not recognize the major and Mary Ann. When he did, he turned off, ostensibly on other business.

Riding across a pleateau then, he came to a running spring. Halting beside it in a spot where timber grew, he dismounted to water his horse. He heard the clatter of a rider coming and jerked up his head. It was Mary Ann. Alone. She slipped from her side saddle.

"Well, Forest, you're quite a stranger! We haven't seen you for several days."

He gave the excuse of work. He had not seen either of the Trestles since the night the major was relieved of his duties as executive officer. By his own request he had been taking his meals in quarters. While Mary Ann prattled on, accenting all her charm, he looked at the distant trail, a suspicion as to the reason for her appearance entering his head. "Elias?" she laughed. "Oh, he went back to the fort. I came on, because this is such a bee-utiful place!"

"Mary Ann," he said, "what is it you want?"

"I? Why, Forest, I wanted to see you. Aren't you glad to see me?" All the charm she poured on failed to move him.

"I have to be going," he said, and stepped to her horse to help her mount.

"Oh, I forgot your new promotion! I'm thrilled, Forest!" She moved between him and the saddle, and as Thomas reached to help her up, she threw her arms around him, kissing him soundly. He did not return the kiss, and she drew away pouting. Coolly Thomas placed her on her saddle.

"You are still mad at me," she said, feigning a deep hurt. "I can't bear your anger Forest. Can't we be—more than passing strangers?"

"I am not mad at you, Mary Ann," he replied, mounting his dun.

SHE STUDIED him. This Forest Thomas was an entirely different man from the one she had known, a man she could not understand. She sought to rearrange her attack as he moved into a fast trot. "Wait, Forest!" she chided. "Not so fast, please! I have something to tell you."

He reined down. "Did Major Trestle send you to me?" he asked bluntly.

Color blazed in her cheeks. But quick lowering of her lashes gave the answer.

"Now, Forest, be reasonable," she begged. "I told Elias that you are an old family friend. For old times sake, you are not going to see me so badly hurt, are you, Forest?" Pleading was a surprising pose for Mary Ann.

"I cannot interfere with Colonel Sudhoff's decision," he reminded. "But that hardly ends your husband's career. He will be simply assigned somewhere else."

"You hate Elias, don't you—because of me?"

"No." He shook his head wearily. "*You* caused him all this trouble."

"He brought it all on himself."

"Forest"—she was begging—"Elias feels sure if you spoke to the colonel we could stay here. That is what I want. To be near you, don't you see?"

He swore under his breath. How transparent she was! "Mary Ann," he said, "I'd help you, if I could, but I can't, and you should understand it."

"You can! You're the fair-haired boy with Colonel Sudhoff, and this ruffian, General Carleton!"

"Why do you want to stay here? There are better assignments—brass bands, parades, weekly balls. The society you always liked, remember?"

"Forest," she said swiftly, "I'll tell you. Elias got into an incredibly serious situation back East. The Senator was connected with it. Don't ask me how. I don't know the details. All I know is that Elias *has* to make good out here!"

She watched his face as he rode with gaze bent on the trail. The fort was in sight, and a troop of cavalry passed, headed for the meadows.

"Will you help me patch matters up for Elias?" she asked him frankly.

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At the direct plea, Thomas paused before replying. He knew Major Trestle had sent her to use her influence with him—a man he despised. The pair were cheap connivers. And he did not like to think that of Mary Ann.

"Mary Ann," he told her, "there may be a chance for Major Trestle to be assigned to another fort, without prejudice. But I can't promise to intercede. I'm only telling you it is possible."

They reached the sally port, and rode through.

"You won't promise me to intercede with Colonel Sudhoff tonight?" she asked, this time with something of demand in her voice.

"No, I'm sorry, Mary Ann."

She sent her horse plunging away from him, furious with anger.

Thomas turned to the stables, his estimate of Trestle at zero. Mary Ann was too much like her father to come begging. That meant the major had sent her. Thomas swore on the way to quarters.

Mary Ann was a problem that was now in his lap. The impossible situation would require some talking to Colonel Sudhoff, yet it could be done. The colonel disliked prosecuting anyone. He thought much of army discipline worse than useless. He could be reasoned with, provided the explanation was sufficient. Thomas decided to see him in the morning. . . .

A TROOPER entering stealthily to light the lamp brought him awake. He blinked in the yellow rays.

"Midnight, sir," said the trooper. "Sergeant Herlits asks please will you hurry to the stables, sir? Important."

Thomas dressed hurriedly. Belting on sidearms, he strode fast over the plaza. Three shapes stood near a whitewashed stable door. He headed there. Two of them were the scouts, and Herlits was talking with them.

"They've got Lucero located, sir!" Herlits reported, his voice edged with eagerness. "Camped five miles north on the rim of the plateau."

The details were quickly given. The scouts, watching the trails, had picked Lucero up at sundown following him into the camp with three companions. They had ten pack mules loaded with kegs of whisky. His coming this near to Fort Defiance showed Lucero's contempt for the army.

"Get those men I told you to keep ready," Thomas told Herlits. "Quietly."

He headed for the office of the O. D., finding Greene there. Thomas said he was taking out a patrol on important business and to so inform the colonel in the morning. He expected to return by then, or by noon at the latest.

Returning to his quarters, as he stepped over the threshold he saw a woman in a quilted robe. Mary Ann wore the robe over her night gown, and her feet were in soft-soled slippers.

"Are you crazy?" he asked her, his voice shaking. She stared at him directly, no smile now on her lips.

"Maybe you didn't understand me this afternoon," she told him, all coquetry gone. "I'm desperate, Forest. Now you'll be glad to do as I asked."

"Yes? Well, I'm in a hurry. Leaving immediately."

"Not before I get through with you!"

"Mary Ann, this is incredible!" he blurted. "It isn't like the girl I believed you to be!"

"Stop the nonsense," she snapped. "I saw you leave this room. I had not gone to bed. So I took this chance to make you intercede with the colonel."

She was more resolute than he could ever have imagined.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"You are?" She laughed coldly. "Do you think I like degrading myself by *begging* you for a favor this afternoon? If you do, you're crazy. But now I'll tell you what to do—you lummox!"

"You're overwrought, excited" he replied gently. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"You'll see me now! I'm through with half-way measures and stupid people! Elias was stupid when he got caught

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about those contracts. The Senator was stupid when he took a hand in such business at the beginning of the war. Now Elias gets kicked out of here, sent back East. Rumors go along the line. All the way. The Senator's enemies, and Elias', too, will start the investigation again."

"All from this small business here? As I said, you're overwrought. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Shut up, until I get through! I'm not going to stand being relegated to a nobody by two crass men. And by a third—you! I don't love Elias! I'm fighting to save my position, don't you understand? If I could survive alone, I'd drop Elias and the Senator, too, in a minute!"

"I see. You never loved anyone but yourself. Kind of a joke on me!"

"My mistake," she admitted baldly, "was in throwing you over for a nit-wit."

"If money means so much to you, where is all that Trestle acquired through those crooked contracts?"

"How long do you think he could hold on to it if he is investigated again? You know it would be seized by the Government!"

"I see now," Thomas said. "It's this money you really want, the money that would have bought warm clothing for the poor devils who froze to death in Sixty-three and Sixty-four. Mary Ann, I'd decided to see Colonel Sudhoff tomorrow morning for you. But not now."

"Oh, yes you will!"

She let her robe fall open, revealing her white body beneath her filmy lace nightgown.

"I tear this gown off me! I scream, and keep on screaming until the guard gets here to save me! So which will it be? The guard, or do you talk to the colonel out of his decision?"

VIII

MARY ANN was determined to carry through her mad scheme. There was no doubt of it. But Thomas felt only a return of bitterness. So Mary Ann had stooped to a trick like this because she couldn't live without the wealth and social position she had known! It hurt to realize her actual pettiness and cold heartlessness.

"Make up your mind," she told him icily. "Don't be a fool. It's the guard or help me. I don't care which."

"Mary Ann," he said hoarsely, "you're crazy!"

"You think so? What do you want to wager if the guard comes that Colonel Sudhoff won't hush everything up, and have to forget about proceedings against Elias?"

"Shall I call the guard myself and save your nightgown?" he asked coldly.

"Let her scream her head off," spoke up Kara's voice from under the cot. "I'm getting tired of being under here!"

Kara rolled out and came to her feet, her eyes on Marry Ann whose own eyes were furious with hatred.

"You little tramp!" she cried. "You odious little tramp!"

"'Sticks and stones may hurt my bones'," chanted Kara, "'but words will never hurt me.'"

"You—you—"

Mary Ann rushed across the room, jerked open the door and ran. The door banged against the wall. Thomas shoved Kara to one side.

"You certainly saved my hide that time," he said to her. "Why?"

"I heard whispers in their quarters," she told him quietly. "Next to ours. Doors open for cool air. They had been arguing for hours. Finally I heard her say, 'I'll get into my nightgown and tackle him in his room.'"

"So you got here ahead of her?" he said. "I asked you, why?"

"I told you before, I love my father. I want his brief military career to be a success. A scandal such as she proposed would be terrible!"

Thomas moved to her, caught her chin and forced her gaze upward.

"I'm still asking, why?"

"Don't touch me!" she snapped.

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Across the plaza drifted the muted noise of accoutrements, the clop of horses hoofs.

Abruptly, gently Thomas kissed Kara. She didn't resist—just stood there, watching him move to the door.

"Tell your father I'm on my way out with a patrol," he said tersely. "We're going after Lucero. Good night, my dear, and quite playing Samaritan. You likewise have a reputation to guard, you know." He strode out to meet Herlits and the troopers.

The patrol quit the fort, passing over the log bridge, before Company F. The tents gleamed whitely under the starlight. The one where the guard and the officer of the day was stationed was fully lighted. As they approached it a trooper was hurled through the flaps to the ground. A big Irish sergeant followed, two privates after him.

"Pack him to his blankets and leave him there to sober up," the sergeant ordered gruffly.

Thomas halted the patrol. "The man is drunk, Sergeant?" he called.

"Yes, sor, that he is."

"Any idea where he got whisky around here?"

"And that I wish I knew, sor!" the sergeant exclaimed.

Thomas rode on with his patrol, taking the trail toward the pleateau. Just before they arrived at the ascent, Herlits exclaimed:

"A rider!"

The darkly outlined silhouette of a man bent over in the saddle streaked from the rim into heavy timber. There was no chance to determine if he was trooper or not. Rider and horse was visible for a flash, then gone.

"Could Lucero have a watch close in here to see if a partol comes out?" Herlits muttered.

"Call in Red Tommy," Thomas instructed. The patrol plunged up the trail for the center of the plateau. Soon Red Tommy took off alone in the general direction of the mysterious rider, and Herlits returned to the front.

IN CASE the rider was indeed a watch for Lucero, Thomas was anxious to reach the whisky runner's camp quickly. Dobahuzsin moved into the lead as guide, slanting steadily toward the west rim of the plateau.

Up ahead through the timber a light winked into existence. Dobahuzsin pulled back. The troopers slowed to a walk. The light became a campfire. Flickering shadows were thrown against the forest as men and animals passed around it.

Fifteen to twenty Indians were working hurriedly around their own stock. The troopers were actually witnessing a whisky deal.

High pitched on the air came:

"Salawa wishtay! Hucco, Deneh, c'inklo, yo'ailygo! Tokenino!"

The alarm of approaching danger!

Thomas gave fast orders. The patrol plunged in and around the camp. Thomas, watching beyond the rocks, saw a rider, and wheeled his horse into brush. Blas Lucero's chunky body showed briefly, and vanished from sight.

The Indians were hastily disappearing, abandoning horses loaded with roped kegs. Dobahuzsin yelled loudly in their own tongue for them to halt. Two guns erupted. Then more crashed in the camp. Thomas plunged through, trying for Lucero. A white man raised up from the ground, aiming a carbine.

Thomas fired from the saddle, and the man flopped to the ground as he charged on. Beyond the camp was only brush, rocks, and timber. Nothing moved. When he returned to the camp the fight was ended, with two of Lucero's men dead, seven Navajo prisoners, captured stock, pack equipment and kegs of whisky. But beyond admitting they had come to buy whisky from Lucero, the prisoners would do no talking.

"Take them all and the property to Fort Defiance, Sergeant," Thomas told Herlits.

Selecting two troopers, one of whom was Sparks who recently had been promoted to corporal, and Dobahuzsin,

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Thomas scouted beyond the camp hoping to locate Lucero. While he searched the timber, Dobahuzsin went farther on.

Soon he was back, excited for a Navajo.

"Go this way!" he called. "Fast!" Swinging his mustang, he took off on a run.

Thomas followed. The troopers spurred after them on a dead run.

On the upper east side of the plateau, Dobahuzsin slowed to a walk, searching the shadowy ground, the timber. Far ahead brush crashed loudly. Dobahuzsin cried out sharply, and took off again.

But there was no further sound of the escaping man. Soon the troopers were brought up on the edge of the plateau looking over into a low land extending toward Crystal Pass.

"There!" yelled Dobahuzsin, and drove his mustang off over the side of the plateau.

Under the starlight raced two riders, but before the troopers were off the plateau, they dodged into a copse. When the troopers raced through it they sighted a lighted jacal at the far end. The occupants had been aroused by riders dashing madly through. Who? *Quien sabe!* Night riders, no doubt, but by now they must have reached the rough, broken country where there was concealment on every hand.

Unable to trail them further by ground sign, Thomas reluctantly called a stop until dawn. But he was determined to go on for at least another day. It was likely that Lucero, believing himself safe from pursuit, would halt in one of the nearer villages or towns.

At daybreak Dobahuzsin picked up the trail, and the troopers forged on. Lucero was heading into the southeast. If he continued long enough he would eventually wind up in Albuquerque. They found one jacal where Lucero and another man had stopped to eat.

Thomas procured food, corn to be carried on the saddles, and went on. With Dobahuzsin such an expert tracker, he had no idea of abandoning the pursuit now, and fully believed they would overhaul Lucero before long.

BAD LUCK struck them the following afternoon. In the ancient Spanish village of San Mateo, Lucero and his man had procured fresh horses before fleeing on, which gave them an added advantage over their pursuers.

"He go Albuquerque," Dobahuzsin insisted. "He cross river one place. San Lazario."

That meant they could now jump ahead, picking up the trail across the Rio Puerco. And at sundown they did find the horse tracks of the fugitives on the sandy east side of the river at San Lazario, which was only two hovels, one on each side of the rock crossing.

The next day they rode into Albuquerque. For Lucero had sought refuge in the city. When Thomas reported to headquarters, the colonel who listened to his report smiled in satisfaction.

"We'll take over from this end," he replied. "If Lucero is still in the city, we'll find him." He gave orders for ancient Albuquerque to be searched immediately.

"You had better rest your men before departing," the colonel said to Thomas. "Go see General Carleton. This has been quite a pursuit, over impossible terrain!"

General Carleton expressed himself feelingly when he heard the story, and offered cigars brought overland from St. Louis.

"I want field officers who can follow a culprit like Lucero to the end," he said. "I have no doubt that if you continued, you would overhaul him. However, there is more important business for you. Renegades, Indian and white alike, are terrorizing the frontier. Stock are being stolen in droves from Utah and Colorado. Two days ago Navajo raiders came through Azteca, northwest of Albuquerque, killed, robbed, and burned the town to the ground. On your return to Fort Defiance, you will proceed to take out your column at once!"

The general continued giving details.

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Thomas was to go through to Navajo Mountain, establish his base camp and the heliograph station, and then wait for final orders to commence the push eastward. The change of plans with the necessary orders, would go back with him in a despatch bag to Fort Defiance.

The general was enthusiastic about prospects for an early peace in the War Between the States. He also felt satisfied that the Indian situation would be adequately attended to. When Thomas arose to depart, the general gave him a stack of St. Louis newspapers.

That night after supper, when Thomas retired to his room in a hotel, he began reading to catch up on recent happenings in the states and the news of battles and campaigns which were obviously bringing the war to an end. Perhaps early the next year, 1865, would see peace in the land.

Naturally the war news interested him first. When he finally turned to inside dispatches from Washington, he was startled by disclosures of more investigations into crooked war materials contracts. However no mention was made of Major Trestle.

Thomas read each of the papers straight through. Senator Zartmann held some of the spotlight, along with other national figures. The scandal resulting from new disclosures was about to blow the capital apart. Arrests had been made. More were alleged about to follow the successful prosecution of the first group. Bigger fish in the net than the Senator might keep him out of the penitentiary, yet his political career was certainly at an end. He might, in fact, be forced to resign in disgrace.

There existed no means of halting the debacle. Likely Major Trestle would soon be in the same boat with Zartmann, Thomas imagined. It also was unlikely that Mary Ann would be able to save much from the catastrophe.

He tried to think of her only as the winsome girl he had first believed her to be. But with the memory of recent occurrences at Fort Defiance fresh in his mind, all he could do was drift off to sleep with a bad taste in his mouth.

For another twenty-four hours Thomas remained in Albuquerque. Each time he sought information at headquarters there was none concerning Lucero. By now the whisky runner would know he had been trailed all the way across the wild country, that the army was looking for him diligently. He would be gone.

ON THE morning he left Thomas returned the newspapers to General Carleton who shook hands with Thomas, wishing him good luck on his coming campaign in the field.

"Oh, by the way," General Carleton added, as Thomas started to leave the office, "this beastly Major Trestle business is solving itself."

Thomas paused. "Yes, sir?" He watched the solemn, strong face, realizing now that the general had had a purpose in lending him the newspapers. Carleton knew, by some means to which he would never refer, of Thomas' connections with the Zartmanns.

"Yes," he said, "instructions and orders have been received to transfer Major and Mrs. Trestle to Fort Leavenworth by the next escorted train. Probably in a month or so. The orders are in the despatch bag you are carrying to Colonel Sudhoff."

Thomas froze for a moment as the possible implication of the transfer occurred.

"Fort Leavenworth is where men are sent for court martial," he said slowly. "It occurs to me that in the major's case he would more likely be sent to Washington where General Grant could get his hands on him?"

The general smiled, his eyes twinkling.

"Major Trestle, if reports of the investigation of him previously are true, is extremely lucky. With more important men in the net now, he becomes a mere minnow. If he uses his head he can skid along safely. Otherwise—he may lose it!"

In the colonel's office Thomas picked

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up the despatch bag, signed out and joined his two troopers and Dobahuzsin. All three looked in the pink after what was to them a vacation. The old scout had acquired some newer pieces of a soldier's uniform. This pleased him greatly, and he felt grateful to the army.

"We come back again sometime, no?" he asked.

"Not for several months," Thomas replied. "We're going to see much more of the country elsewhere."

That was as near as he came to informing them the column was heading for Navajo Mountain soon after they returned to Fort Defiance.

Though anxious to get back, Thomas made the first part of the journey over the military road leisurely. From Ojo del Oso, however, they departed after midnight, in order to arrive early at Fort Defiance. Just short of noon they rode in. Delivering the despatch bag, Thomas took his own horse to the stables.

Sergeant Herlits greeted him and asked for news of the trip. He was not too greatly disappointed they lost Lucero, having rather suspected they would.

"Red Tommy worked for days on the tracks of the horse that spy rode," he said.

"It was a spy with Lucero?"

"Well, sir, them tracks left the encampment and returned to it from Lucero's camp. Who else could he have been? Red Tommy sure gave them horse tracks a careful goin' over. He's plumb positive the rider came out of Company F's holding ground."

"Hmm! Has he tried to identify the shoe marks with those of any other horse?"

"Yes, sir, Colonel!" Herlits grinned with pride as he rolled that "Colonel" over his tongue. "Red Tommy has been lookin' at the ground, examining tracks so long his neck's twisted!"

"How fit is the company?"

"Why, we're ready to ride, sir," Herlits replied. "The lieutenants and me have had men out every day on trainin'. We can be gone any time we get the word, sir."

"Excellent! Because, Sergeant, we're departing with the column at daybreak tomorrow."

Taking the sergeant, who became all eagerness when he heard that news, Thomas went to Company F. There he found both companies just in from joint maneuvers. The dour Scot, Captain Yarden, was talking to the officers.

"I believe the lists of provisions and supplies were delivered some time ago?" Thomas said when greetings were exchanged. "How soon can you draw the requisitions and load?"

"Can lay my hands on every item as fast as Captain Yarden gets the packs to me," Lieutenant Greene answered.

"Fine," Thomas drawled. "Draw the supplies, prepare the packs for loading. We're breaking camp at dawn for the far western end of No-Man's-Land!"

Herlits turned away, to hide his amusement at their thunderstruck expressions.

IX

SPREAD out, Companies C and F were leaving the fort fast. Thomas returned to see the colonel, who was surprised that the column could depart so soon, but proud of their readiness.

"We eat tonight in quarters," he told Thomas. "Kara is doing the cooking. I am to tell you that you are expected to sup with us."

"Thank you, sir!"

From then on Thomas was busy inspecting supplies, mounts and equipment. After retreat he cleaned up and walked to the Sudhoffs' quarters. The front door stood wide open, through it flowing conversation in Navajo, between Kara and Dobahuzsin.

She paused to say, "Come in, Colonel Thomas!" when he appeared. The old scout got up from the floor to set an empty place on the small table.

"*Ahkahay, sche daishe,*" he said in departing.

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One of Kara's rare smiles lighted her face.

"He always calls me little sister, and thanks me for pie," she explained to Thomas. "Dobahuzsin considers himself a kinsman of mine."

"He's a good scout."

"He likes you," she replied, as she returned to her small field stove. "He claims you are the first officer he's worked for in a long time who knew what he was doing. How to fight the—renegades." She had hesitated over "Navajo."

"When I think about the old scout, I wonder," Thomas said thoughtfully. "He is all Navajo, yet he has fought in every desperate skirmish with me. You'd think against his own people he might pull his fire."

She finished basting a roast before she answered.

"No Navajo worthy the name ever backs down from a fight they're in," she told him then. "When they are on one side they fight all comers no matter who they are. So far Dobahuzsin has not been pitted against his own clan. Even if he were he would fight for what he believes right, even against a blood brother. The Navajos admire a brave man above all else."

That was a lengthy speech for her.

"Dobahuzsin doesn't like renegades either," Thomas said.

"His opinion is the same as mine. Isn't it a pity a part of the tribe continues raiding, helped by Lucero who furnishes them arms and whisky! Oh why can't they make a real treaty with Washington, return to the homeland and live in peace!"

Hurriedly she began setting the table. Thomas helped, placing the silver. Kara talked on in brief sentences, but ceased when Colonel Sudhoff appeared. The supper was excellently done; the roast mutton superb. Thomas hated to drag himself away, but there was still work to be done. After his final check to see that all was in order, he had just returned to his quarters to pack his saddle bags when an orderly appeared.

"Mrs. Trestle would like to see you sir," he reported.

Thomas debated the advisability of seeing Mary Ann. No good could come of it. What was the use of seeing her anyhow? Still, he walked down the row to where the door to the Trestle's room stood half open, light flowing out. He raised his hand to knock.

"Come on in, Forest," Mary Ann called. "I have been waiting for you." The tone of her voice surprised him.

She was sitting beside the table on which the lamp stood. She surveyed him a bit anxiously as he confronted a changed Mary Ann whose attitude was serious and wholly impersonal. As he glanced around the room he realized the major was not present.

As if reading his mind she said, "Elias is over with the engineering detachment. Sit down."

He did, and waited.

"I suppose you heard in Albuquerque that Elias and I are being sent back?"

"Well, yes. I heard to Fort Leavenworth."

"You talked to General Carleton?"

"Yes," he admitted, and again waited—uncomfortably.

"I have news from home," she went on soberly. "Affairs are in serious shape. I imagine Elias will be arrested on our arrival in Leavenworth."

"What have you learned about the detention of higher-ups?" he asked. "The accusation against the Senator, and people more important than Major Trestle?"

SHE almost smiled, but it was bitterly. "All that is necessary. What is your opinion concerning our transfer?"

"Most likely routine. Maybe to get him closer to the War Department for requisitioning, if necessary."

"That isn't what I asked. Will the investigation go far enough this time to entangle Elias?"

"I don't believe so," he said. "Though that is only my opinion. Major Trestle

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isn't important enough for those who are reaching for bigger game."

"Did General Carleton express a similar opinion?"

"In a way."

"Well," she said, relaxing a trifle, "I am sticking with Elias until he is free of all possible charges. That may surprise you, since I've shown myself to be so shallow and mercenary."

He did not answer. What was the use? The night she had threatened him she had been overwrought, not caring for consequences in what she considered the dire emergency of helping herself. She had been willing to use any weapon to gain her ends. But tonight she was coldly calm. Still ruthless, perhaps, but calculating instead of reckless.

"I am going to divorce Elias as soon as this scandal is forgotten," she went on. "To do so now would only contribute to the flames reaching for the Senator as well as for Elias." She saw him smile and said impetuously: "Why not? He has dragged me, as his wife into the limelight of notoriety. I owe him nothing." She ended dispassionately.

"Love gone out the door?"

"You don't imagine I married him for love?" Her fleeting smile quickly evaporated.

"I know of no other reason why two people should get married."

"You wouldn't," she said softly. "It doesn't interest you that I shall be free again?"

"No."

She studied him just long enough to understand he meant it. A shadow passed over her beautiful face.

"Nothing like burning one's bridges," she remarked coolly. "I have made myself a complete fool to you. And since the other night I have realized you are the only decent man I've ever known."

"Now, Mary Ann, you're worked up again!"

"You know better," she answered, rising. "I'm thinking so clearly that I even see my way to retaining what you called 'position.'"

"Well, wherever you go from here, I sincerely wish you luck." He got to his feet.

"I believe you mean that, Forest. I knew you would be leaving at dawn, so I wanted to see you one more time. It may be long before we meet again."

"Probably. I intend to remain in the West."

She held out her white hand, which he took.

"Forest, I wish you luck, too."

He came away feeling dull and emotionless. Mary Ann would always go swaggering through life in her own selfish way, but still he couldn't believe her all bad.

"In a daze, Colonel?" a voice said at his shoulder.

He came to a sudden stop before the open door of the Sudhoff's quarters. Kara was standing there. He entered when she backed inside the room.

"All has been forgiven and you have made up?" she asked it casually.

"I feel sorry for her, so I went when she asked me to," he replied lamely.

"Ah—" she laughed, low—"when a man feels sorry for a woman, there is no love left."

He flushed before her laughing gaze.

"You have known all along, haven't you?" he demanded.

She nodded, but showed no further amusement.

"Before you go in the morning I want to see you," she said. "Will you come here before you leave?"

"Why, yes," he replied, wondering.

"Good night, then, Colonel."

KARA whisked through his dreams that night, slender and straight, with her soft smile, and her quiet efficiency.

At three early reveille awoke him. By four o'clock the company was ready to proceed to join the column forming in the valley. Post officers and men were up to see them off. After the muster report, Thomas rode over before the colonel's quarters.

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The front room was lighted, and the door opened as he approached. Stepping inside he saw that Kara was fully dressed, even to riding boots. On her face was a strange intensity. Walking up to him, she reached up to unbutton the collar of his tunic.

"When ancient man rode to war he went bearing a token from someone who wished him survival," she said.

"That was in the Crusades, Kara. Don't be frivolous. You couldn't be."

"I was never more serious in my life," she said. "I want a promise from you, even though you think what I am about to do the sheerest nonsense."

"Well," he answered, "whatever I can do to please you, lady!"

"It is this." Her right hand went to a pocket in her dress. He saw only a buckskin string as it darted up under his chin. She tied it around his neck quickly.

When he looked down he saw a tiny buckskin bag.

Her swift fingers buttoned his collar and she stepped away from him. A charm, he thought, a medicine magic fetish from her Navajo ancestors.

"Kara, I can't wear—" he began.

"You can," she broke in with eager intensity. "It is to be worn day and night. Under your shirt. No one need see it—unless necessary."

"You mean—" he smiled at her child-like faith—"this will keep me from being struck by enemy bullets?"

"No," she replied. "But please. You promised. You will wear it all the time you are gone?"

"Well, yes," he told her. "Since it seems to mean so much to you."

She did not join in his humorous chuckle. The moment was terribly serious and important to her. Quickly she raised her arms, put them around his neck, kissed him and retreating swiftly across the room.

"*Adios*," she said.

"Good-by for now," he replied, and passed out into the rising light.

Mounting, he rode with Company C from the fort to the cheers of men on the plaza. Captain Yarden had the balance of the column formed. The unit was joined and riding behind the guidon flapping in the wind of the new day, fighting men set forth for the western trail and what Fate had in store for them.

Section followed section, so that when Thomas looked back from the edge of Defiance plateau it was to see a column extending well down the valley.

ON FEELING the thong about his neck he grinned. Just a foolish superstition, of course. Still he would wear it to please Kara. As she had said, no one need know.

The column rolled west over the valley of the Chinle, tightening up the slack, conditioning troopers for the hard campaign ahead. From camp to camp it progressed steadily towards Oraibi. No signal fires of Indians were observed until just before reaching the Hopi towns. These signals were believed to have been made by the Hopis themselves.

That night Thomas questioned Sergeant Herlits on a matter that had bothered him vaguely for days. Company F had six Indian scouts along. It was more reasonable to believe one of these men friendly to Lucero than to suspect any one of the troopers. What had Red Tommy managed to dig up about those horse tracks?

"Claims he had a look at the tracks of every horse around Fort Defiance," Herlits told him. "Thinks maybe them shoes was pulled quick, and the horse reshod to keep the animal from being found."

Thomas nodded, a thin smile on his lips. Only a scout would know that another scout would recognize those horse tracks wherever seen again. Even after days. A white man might forget them within an hour. A scout of long experience, such as the two with Company C, would remember every single peculiarity of the marks made by that horse.

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THE next morning when they formed to go on, he got Dobahuzsin alone.

"You know Kara," he said. "The colonel's daughter? She is kin to you, no?"

"Si." Dobahuzsin gave a pleased grin. "My little sister *et'ta!*"

"You look, savvy?" Thomas unfastened his shirt collar, exposing the tiny buckskin bag. "She give me."

A curious expression flickered in the old scout's eyes. They became almost like the round black knobs on a woman's hat pin. Despite his inscrutableness, Thomas realized the scout was badly hit. Whatever the talisman was, Dobahuzsin refused to open his mouth about it.

Thomas returned it inside his shirt, buttoning up. They rode on at one side of the column of threes across the sered land.

"This spy who tell Lucero we come that night," Thomas said, aftr a time. "This man great friend Lucero. You savvy?"

"Savvy," replied Dobahuzsin. "Plenty savvy."

"He rode the horse that had the changed shoes. Mebby-so with us now." He waved a hand at the column. "Mebby-so Indian scout. You savvy?"

Dobahuzsin had been thawing out, but reverted to painful inscrutableness once more. Sergeant Herlits said that Red Tommy also had shut up talking about the spy when they got around to discussing the scouts with Company F.

Abruptly old Dobahuzsin's thin lips parted in a weird kind of fixed grin.

"He with scouts, me catch," he declared, and opened and closed his right fist hard.

What that spy, whoever he was, might do in a pinch concerned Thomas. He wanted him weeded out, at least known and under surveillance.

That night bivouac was made under the mesa walls at Oraibi, where the column remained for two days. The squat, dark Hopi men came down. They wanted to go along with the soldiers as they had the year before, thinking there would be stock and other loot for the taking. Thomas dickered with them for the blue and reddish maize they farmed in quantity.

The column moved on loaded with all the corn the stock could carry in addition to the other loads. Now it swung over deep washes that would be turgid, roiling rivers when rains came. The country grew more rolling and sandy. In the far north depths of terrane came into being.

Thomas took the column around the base of Black Mountain, through the muddy red lake, now a mass of hardening alluvial soil.

At sunset, tall columns of black signal smoke raised along the rim of the mountains. Others answered from distant mesas, buttes and the mole-hill shape of Navajo Mountain, still seventy-odd miles away. The next day they plunged into the weird maze of the far-heralded canyon country. And at each sunset, signal smokes reported their progress.

"Sure talkin' to each other," commented Herlits.

"That's the moccasin telegraph," Lieutenant Greene declared. "They say these beggars can send a message clear across their country inside a couple of hours!"

X

ALARM was in the land. And even a small group of hostiles could cause immeasurable trouble, by running off stock at night, shooting into the troopers' camp, or waylaying them on the trails where the column spread thin. Thomas posted extra night guards and sent out-riders along the line of march.

Captain Yarden considered this unnecessary.

"You think they would dare jump us?" he asked. "These poor benighted savages attack such a force as ours?"

"Have you ever heard the Navajo war cry before dawn?" Thomas asked.

The Scotsman snorted. "I've had Plains Indians and Apaches reaching

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for my topknot with a knife in one hand. What could be worse?"

"Wait until you hear the Navajo war cry," Thomas told him.

From the canyons the column emerged up onto a vast plateau on one side of the mountain. Here in the sagebrush-covered levels many trails showed the hasty departure of flocks and cattle. Navajos living in the area had fled.

At War God Spring, the signal corps detachment went out to set up their heliograph equipment. On the second day they got through to Black Point, then permanent contact to Fort Defiance was established.

The first official message to Thomas read:

LOCATE BUT DO NOT ATTACK NAVAJO BANDS. SPECIAL COURIER ON WAY TO YOU WITH NEW INSTRUCTIONS. POSSIBILITY OF SECURING CHIEF BLACK WIND'S AGREEMENT TO SURRENDER OF ALL HIS PEOPLE.

The message was signed by Colonel Sudhoff.

The next day another message came through:

BLAS LUCERO REPORTED ON UPPER BLACK MOUNTAIN WITH WAGONS AND TWENTY MEN. TRADING ARMS AND WHISKY. LOCATE AND CAPTURE.

Thomas swore as he gazed across the wild country to the escarpment of Black Mountain. Seventy miles, mostly of steep-sided canyons. Dangerous territory in which to risk cavalry. He discussed the order with Captain Yarden.

"We have to go, don't we?" Yarden said. "When do I start?"

"You want to make the trip?"

"Its aboot time, laddie, that I saw some of this fighting with Indians and renegades I have been hearing aboot!"

"Pick your own men and your time of departure. I'd sure like to get my hands on Lucero again."

So Yarden departed with a hard-rid-

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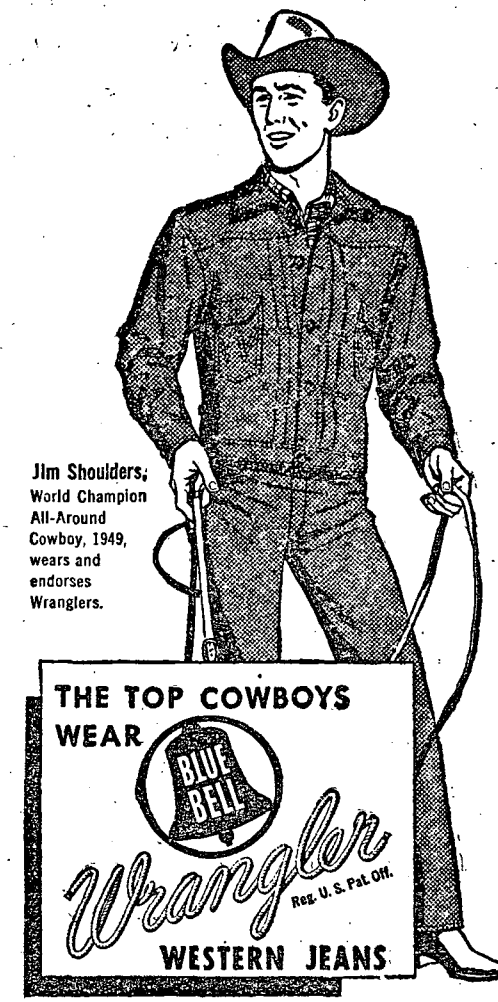
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ing squadron.

None of the patrols reported Indians, until one of Company F's lieutenants returned after nightfall, hours late. He had been down in a spur of Piute Canyon.

"This small band of Navajos jumped our scout," he told Thomas worriedly. "We had to go in and rescue him."

Thomas hardened himself to hear the worst. There had been shooting, he learned, and fifteen Navajos had been killed. Blood had been spilled, and there would be sniping at the patrols now.

"First time I ever heard of a scout who got himself in such a fix," Thomas said bitterly. "Who is this scout?"

"A half-breed Mexican Navajo named Chacos Nez. Oh, he's good, Colonel. It wasn't his fault."

"Let's have a look at him."

The scout, a thin, sullen-looking man, was brought in.

"Why did you shoot into the Navajos?" Thomas asked him.

Chacos Nez claimed not to speak English. Red Tommy, called to question him, watched Chacos Nez obliquely. Thomas saw at once that there was bad feeling between the two.

Thomas repeated his question. Chacos Nez spat out a few angry words.

"He say, he no shoot first," Red Tommy interpreted. "He say they did. He speak English. Me, I savvy this man big liar."

"You think he started the shooting with these Navajos?"

"Them people no want fight. Only three men. All rest women and children. When he fight they fight back. All get killed. Women and children."

THOMAS leaned back, glanced at the hanging lantern and back at Red Tommy. His face was as hard as the scout's.

"Were scalps taken?" he asked the lieutenant.

"No. I pulled out immediately. But it is true, I saw mostly women and children lying dead. It was horrible, Colonel. We didn't know the women were using the guns after the men died."

"Liar!" Red Tommy spat at Chacos Nez. "He takes scalps. Bring back sack full!"

"He could have," the lieutenant put in uneasily. "He joined us on top of the canyon after we came out."

Were the women and children of Black Wind's band? Red Tommy said they were. Thomas realized then that there was going to be immediate and serious trouble. This likely meant no possible chance of a peaceful settlement, for Black Wind would want vengeance.

Nor could he blame the chief. Slow wrath kept mounting in Thomas. This was despicable. The scout had started a one-man war, and into it had plunged the lieutenant with his patrol. A cool, neat piece of crafty work.

"Order the scalps destroyed," Thomas told the lieutenant. "Confine your scout to camp hereafter. I'd like to stand him before a firing squad!"

A little later old Dobahuzsin came in on silent feet.

"Bad, very bad," he said mournfully. "Black Wind make the talk now. With gun. With arrow. They come—pouff! and all gone."

The next morning only one patrol was sent out, with orders for only a brief reconnaissance. From the timber above War God Spring, an arrow came fleeting to drive its steel-tipped end into the back of a trooper who fell dead out of his saddle. Not even the scouts could trail the warrior who had drawn that bow string.

Black Wind was doing his stalking with death.

Another order flashed over the heliograph:

ADVANCE PATROL TO MEET SPECIAL COURIER UNDER ESCORT VIA ORAIBI TRAIL.

Thomas turned to Lieutenant Greene.

"It's yours. Take some of Sergeant Herlits' veterans and Red Tommy."

The day after Greene departed two of Captain Yarden's riders came in, both

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wounded. They reported Navajos everywhere, but not in strong force. Yarden sent word that he was unable to get a trace of Lucero. He would search three days longer before returning.

That same afternoon Colonel Sudhoff sent a mesage to Thomas:

AM MOST ANXIOUS YOU PERSONALLY SEE THAT COURIER REACHES YOU SAFELY.

That perplexed him. He couldn't see why the colonel should be worried over a military courier under armed escort. Unless the mesage he bore was of such vital importance it must get through.

Summoning Herlits, he told him to get ten men ready to ride with them, and placed the first lieutenant of Company F in command.

Thomas rode off with men who had been with him on the long push across to Black Mountain. Night found them at Tseghi. Into camp that night appeared Dobahuzsin.

"You forget me," he said, faint accusation in his voice. "I come to catch up."

Thomas let him stay. He actually had forgotten the old scout.

Greene would reach the courier the next day, Thomas figured. They would meet in the big valley west of the red lake. Accordingly he did not push on too fast. Late afternoon found them in the valley north of the white-walled mesa. Dobahuzsin found the tracks of two shod horses, but studied them only briefly.

"Run fast," he chuckled. "Mebby-so see us." In the sand he couldn't tell how old the sign might be.

In the dusk the sound of firing echoed in the valley. Immediately the patrol halted. The shooting continued sporadically as Thomas led his men toward the sound.

When sand hills gave way to rocks, the shooting was close, and as troopers raced in, the babbling war cry of the Navajo rang out.

Thomas yelled an order to charge. The roar of weapons grew deafening. Then Thomas burst beyond a towering sandstone crag onto the scene.

Troopers stood with their backs to the wall of another crag, trying to stand off a score of Navajos riding fleet-footed ponies straight at them. Thomas' men opened fire.

QUICKLY the line of attackers broke. Two sections speed off into the falling night, but not without leaving dead behind. Lieutenant Greene walked out from the rock as Thomas rode in.

His teeth flashed in a rueful grin. He swung an arm toward five new mounds. Thomas was thunderstruck.

"We buried them all," Greene told him.

"What the devil happened?"

"We missed the escort because it wasn't on the regular trail," Greene explained. For some reason they could not ascertain from ground sign, the escort had swung wide to this side of the valley on entering it hours ago.

This meant that when they did reach the regular trail Greene had had to turn back. Sometime before they had ridden up onto the bodies Red Tommy had heard distant firing. When they reached the spot where the dead troopers lay, the horses had been taken away. While graves were being dug, Red Tommy had scouted. He had just come in to report that some fifteen or sixteen riders who did not ride like Navajo Indians had left the ambush spot, when the Navajos had attacked. Thomas had come in time to avert what might have turned into a desperate death stand.

There was no way of determining if one of the dead had been the courier; for no official dispatches had been found on the bodies. Red Tommy approached Thomas and spoke somberly.

"Seven riders on the main trail. When we get here, we following only five. No got time to find where before killers come. Maybe the New Mexicans capture them two?"

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"New Mexicans did this killing?" Thomas exclaimed.

"Ride like them. All over horse. No Indian ride that way."

Thomas wheeled on Dobahuzsin. "You can find those two sets of horse tracks?" He got a nod of the head. "Mount and ride!" he yelled at the troopers.

In some manner the courier must have escaped the ambush with a companion. If they could get to them before they fell into Navajo hands something might be saved!

Dobahuzsin led them back to where he had found the horse tracks. The rising moon revealed them. It wasn't hard to trail even in the bad light, until the sand ended. Then Dobahuzsin left his saddle, working with Red Tommy afoot. Frequently it took them fifteen minutes or more to pick up the lost traces.

As the trail grew worse it looked as if they would have to give up. Thomas wasn't sure they were following tracks any longer when Dobahuzsin faced him.

"Horses were tired," he said. "No go far. Run too much."

Another stretch of bare sand helped them cover a mile. The deep horse tracks could be followed from the saddle. Then the region became difficult because of solid masses of sandstone and sagebrush flats with scattered stands of juniper. From the edge of the wind-riffled sand the scouts verged over into the lee of a solid rock butte. The horses were left back a few yards.

The scouts crouched before the base of the wall. Dobahuzsin gathered dry sagebrush and kindled it into a bright blaze. The troopers with Greene moved up, but not over any tracks.

Something about the intent way the scouts studied sign revealed by the blaze caught Thomas' attention. He went over, peering at the loose sand. Here the riders had dismounted to rest for some time. Their tracks were the imprints of moccasins.

"Navajos—not the courier," he said dully.

"Two squaw," opined Dobahuzsin with positivenes. "One smoke. Other one no smoke. This squaw, Navajo." He pointed to the larger imprints. "This one, no like Navajo feets."

"There is a difference?" Thomas asked.

"See?" Red Tommy pointed it out. "This older squaw, her moccasin toes point in. Big toe shapes foot to point on this side. Savvy? This other one, her point come up and around in a circle, not a slant. Yet she wears moccasins that Navajo made."

DOBAHUZSIN suddenly sprang to his feet, kicked the sagebrush to scatter the embers.

"This mocassin. I make," he declared quietly. "I make him for Kara Sudhoff."

Thomas couldn't believe what he heard.

"No?" he blurted. "It can't be!"

"Hosteen is not wrong." Red Tommy insisted. "I saw him make these moccasins."

Staggered, though he never doubted the scouts' assertions as startling as they were, Thomas feared the two women now were lost or in enemy hands, for in this moment he considered the Navajos their enemies.

"They women," Dobahuzsin said gently. "Navajo not harm women. Both Navajo. Can go through."

"We find them soon," Red Tommy added hopefully.

"It's impossible to trail from here!" Thomas cried.

"They no go far," the old scout murmured. "Hide."

Greene, dismounted, approached them as they reached their own horses.

"The two who left the armed escort before the ambush are women," Thomas told him. "One of them is Kara Sudhoff!"

Greene was speechless, and then he swore feelingly. The scouts mounted. Thomas followed them into saddle, riding up between them. Both were busy scrutinizing all close natural landmarks. The timber, the masses of stone rear-

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ing up from the sagebrush-covered floor.

"Maybe they have already been found by Navajos who will take them elsewhere," Thomas ventured.

"That very fine," Red Tommy answered. "Black Wind is Kara Sudhoff's uncle."

Thomas began to understand then why they believed the women safe. But this was not the reason for the colonel's worry. He knew Kara would not be harmed by Navajos, especially any of Black Wind's band. Lucero had been his real concern.

The scouts rode warily now, listening. Finally old Dobahuzsin threw his head back. From his lips issued a peculiar cry.

It started with "Whu-hu-hu-hu," and ended in two short hoots. He waited a minute before giving it a second time. No reply. They rode on about half a mile more. Again the cry was given.

At the next halt the scouts separated in opposite directions. Dobahuzsin approached a stand of junipers in the moonlight. Halfway to them he gave his hooting signals again. So promptly as to be startling he got an answer.

Thomas spurred after the scout, to see Kara and an Indian woman crawl out from hiding in the brush. Their horses were deeper inside. Kara did not speak, or hardly look at him as he dismounted. She had become all Navajo, even in her dress, for she was attired like the woman who stood silently beside her. A dark dress of many yards of material fell from her waist to the ground, covering her feet. The jacket adorned with silver buttons was a deep red *bayeta.* She wore a fringed shawl draped about her shoulders.

Dobahuzsin also had refrained from speaking. Now he swung aside and began to pile sagebrush limbs together, starting a fire. The troopers were coming in. The fire also brought Red Tommy.

Thomas instructed Greene to dismount the men and set a guard. Off about a hundred yards, the troopers kindled fires of their own, and ate food from their saddles. Thomas sank to the ground beside Dobahuzsin. The old scout talked in a low voice. When he finished the Navajo woman replied.

KARA turned unsmiling dark eyes toward Thomas.

"It was murderous, the way Lucero shot the troopers down," she said.

"You saw it?"

"From the distance. As always my aunt—she is my half-aunt, Black Wind's sister—and I rode in the rear of the men. They were farther ahead of us than usual. Riders had been seen earlier to the northeast, and we went off the regular trail, fearing an ambush."

She paused, but after a bit began talking again. Still wary, she said, the escort advanced into the valley toward the rocks. It was already understood that in case of a Navajo attack, the women would flee to one side. When they did, they were abreast of the place where guns erupted from ambush.

Kara had still thought the men in there would be Navajos. They had been approaching the sandhill when her aunt hissed a warning. Both had rushed into hiding, but beyond the rocks Kara had seen Lucero leading his men away, with the troopers' mounts. That had meant the escort was dead to the last man!

Aware that Lucero meant real danger to them the two women had sent their horses on at a hard run, trying to get out of the valley. But the horses had soon tired. There had been nothing for them to do but hide here in the brush.

XI

QUIETLY Lieutenant Greene had slipped up to listen as Kara spoke. When she had finished he said a few words to Red Tommy, his lips grim, and stalked over to confront Thomas.

"Colonel," he begged earnestly, "let me take after Lucero. I can reach those rocks tonight, be after him at daylight.

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Maybe Captain Yarden and I can get him between us."

He was so anxious to pursue Lucero that Thomas hated to refuse him. Besides, there was a good chance he could overhaul the whisky runner and his killer band. The trouble was that Greene's patrol was small. Suppose he encountered a large force of Navajos?

Green seemed to sense the reason for the colonel's hesitation.

"I can make out," he declared stoutly.

"Colonel, sir," Sergeant Herlits quickly spoke up, "the boys are mighty put out over the killin' of them five. We'd be plumb glad of a chance to chase him."

Thomas thought rapidly. How many men would he need as an escort to get Kara and her aunt through to Navajo Mountain? He decided that three would do, but Greene demurred, insisting he should take more.

"No"—Thomas shook his head—"you take all the boys, Greene. They all want a whack at Lucero, and who can blame them?"

Greene was reluctant, but Thomas was firm. So, mounting, the troopers rode off in the night, with Red Tommy to do the tracking.

Dobahuzsin kicked out the few fires left burning.

"We go when horses rest more," the old scout said.

"How in the world, Kara, did the colonel happen to let you come all the way across the Navajo country like this?" Thomas asked.

Black Wind, she said, had sent two messengers to Fort Defiance to tell the colonel the chief was willing to discuss terms of surrender. He might come in with all his band if some arrangement could be made about his flocks and cattle. He did not want to go into a prison camp to starve to death as they had heard was the case at Fort Sumner. He would talk if a delegation would meet him at Blue Canyon, west of Hopi Oraibi.

The colonel had thought this worth a try, but Kara believed Black Wind knew the big campaign against the Navajos still holding out was about to get under way. She said that if someone he knew explained the situation to him he might be induced to come in. If he surrendered, many lives would be saved. And Kara, sick at the fate of so many Navajos in the ancient homeland, had begged her father to let her go, and think only of the good she might be able to do.

An armed escort could get her safely through the eastern half of No-Man's-Land. Once beyond Oraibi, Navajos ruled. Finally he had agreed, and her aunt who worked in an officer's home at Ojo del Oso had been sent for to accompany her. Kara's aunt, being Black Wind's sister, would be a great help at the pow-wow.

IT WAS not until after their departure that Colonel Sudhoff must have learned that Lucero was believed to be on Black Mountain.

Kara had all the arguments, but Thomas still did not believe she should have faced the dangers of such a trip.

"I think it was worth the risk," she replied slowly. "I might have saved many Navajo lives."

He looked at her keenly. "Then you know about—about the murder of the Navajo women and children the other day?"

"That was what it was—murder!" she said bitterly. "Even if troopers did it. Dobahuzsin told us about it."

"You don't believe there's still a chance of talking Black Wind into coming in?"

"What do you think?" she asked. "Suppose it was your people who had been killed."

"I would fight and keep on fighting," he could only reply frankly.

"I am afraid Black Wind will be like that, too. Still I can try."

Dobahuzsin brought out the women's horses. Lather had dried on them, but he rubbed them down with bark from sagebrush.

Turning away he said shortly, "Kut!" and went to his pony.

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KARA and her aunt mounted, and Thomas fell in behind them. Dobahuzsin, in the lead, hugged all the shadows possible, finally climbing out of the valley onto a plateau. At no time did he go near the route followed down by the troopers. The night was almost gone when they walked their mounts into Tseghiatoh. There the horses were watered, and rubbed down again.

"Sleepy?" Thomas asked Kara.

"I have been sleeping in the saddle."

"Maybe we should rest here?" he suggested.

"We go on," she replied. "This is a dangerous place. Once on the plateau before the mountain—you are safe." She knew he would be the one at whom Navajos in ambush would fire gun or arrow.

When he helped her mount, her hand went up quickly to press the bag which hung around his neck. And she smiled.

Within an hour dawn broke. The bulk of Navajo Mountain rose clear and startling in the air. The bluish sage carpeted what seemed to be a flat surface for miles, but there were washes and hollows in the plain.

"This is the most beautiful country I have ever seen," Thomas murmured to Kara. "No wonder the Navajos fight for it."

"All Navajo country is beautiful," she said. "Though the white man sees the sand and barren ground in some parts of it, which blinds him to the good earth it really is."

When they reached War God Spring Dobahuzsin, mindful of the feathered arrow that had killed a trooper close by, rode warily until they were in the more open pine forest.

"We will rest in your camp for a time," Kara told Thomas, "then go on to see Black Wind."

"But how on earth will you know where to find his hiding place?"

"The Navajos will find us. They are all around us now, but when a Navajo doesn't want to be seen, it is almost impossible to find him. We will take Dobahuzsin with us. He will be recognized and permitted to come in, and leave without harm."

At the fringe of the pine forest where timber had been trimmed of all low branches, the troopers' camp lay spread before them. Kara pulled the shawl up over her head, covering her black braids which might have indicated she was not Navajo, in spite of her dress. Her aunt, like all Navajo women, wore her hair in a white-string-wrapped fold down her back.

Thomas ordered a guard who stood before his tent, to have a detail set up another tent behind his for the women.

"Meantime, you rest in mine," he told Kara. "I'll have hot food for you soon. It is almost noon."

She spoke briefly to her aunt, and they entered his tent together. Dobahuzsin took the horses away. The first lieutenant who had been left in command came hurrying up.

"Fort Defiance has been asking all morning for reports," the lieutenant informed.

"I'll go send one now."

As the lieutenant went away, Kara appeared in the open flaps of the tent. "Please don't tell my father about what has happened," she asked. "He would worry all the more."

Thomas nodded, deciding to say only in his message that the courier had arrived safely at the base camp.

Late that afternoon a reconnaissance patrol was attacked between the mountain and the big east canyon, and two troopers were wounded before the attackers were driven off. The lieutenant in command reported quite a force, all well-armed, but likely not members of Black Wind's band which was in the west canyon. Thomas decided to take a patrol out himself to investigate the east canyon.

In the morning Kara and her aunt were furnished with fresh mounts, given some presents, and permitted to depart with Dobahuzsin. Thomas, ready for his own patrol, waited above War God

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Spring until the three disappeared in the direction of the west canyon.

WITH a scout from Company F, he set forth then. On top of the mesa they found where spies obviously had camped to observe the activity of the patrols. It had been deserted suddenly. The scout decided three men had done the spying.

The patrol followed their scurrying trail across the plateau to the big east canyon, and into it. On the sandy floor close to a small spring-fed stream, they found tracks of riders made since the last patrol had ridden in here. Thomas dispatched a lieutenant with most of the patrol to continue down the canyon, but not to proceed far for fear of ambush.

Thomas, with the scout and four troopers turned up the canyon for a brief exploration before overtaking the other party. Weeping willows grew along the small stream. The leaves were just turning yellow in the depths of the canyon; though it was now October. Where the walls began to close toward each other a side canyon opened, and horse tracks turned in there. The soft ground showed that they had been recently made.

Halting at the entrance, Thomas scrutinized the floor of the side canyon. Boulders, chunks of sandstone, and brush cluttered it from wall to wall. An ideal place for an ambush if the riders of the horses whose tracks were being followed were still in there.

The bright sun shone down from directly overhead onto the picturesque wilderness spot. But with only four troopers this was no time to be exploring it.

Thomas was ready to withdraw when he saw Navajo horsemen lined up on the rim, gazing down at them in the canyon. With their accoutrements and ponies they were silhouetted against the azure sky.

"I reckon we're a little late, sir," a trooper said, "They've done rode out of here."

Thomas nodded. But he wanted to have a look-see into this side canyon.

"String out behind me," he said. "I'll move in to reconnoiter."

The spring-fed canyon stream ran in a ditch only inches deep, and a deep-cut trail ran beside it. The soil was so fertile that vegetation grew profusely, even clinging to the solid rock base of the narrowing canyon walls.

The Navajos on the rim disappeared, making no attempt to descend, although they outnumbered the troopers overwhelmingly. Thomas moved forward at a walk, his men on the alert for any skulking Navajo who might be secreted here.

The pony tracks wound through the blocks of sandstone and brush toward the base of the wall, then began the climb out. Thomas rode on toward the box end of the small canyon until, nearing a stand of rocks and brush from which he would disappear from sight, he turned in the saddle to signal his men to remain where they were.

As he rode on, he found the way choked so as to impede passage. He crossed the trickle, coming back along the other side of the canyon. Wild rose bushes grew in profusion, and surprisingly he came upon thin, smooth-barked redbuds.

He was within sight of the first mounted trooper when he reached a huge block of sandstone beside which were numerous moccasin tracks. Thomas didn't have to be told then. Experience on many battlefields had created in him an intuitive sense for danger. Navajos were still pocketed in this small canyon!

Thomas never saw where the arrow came from. He was turning away instinctively when the shaft snapped through the air. Perhaps that move saved his life, but as it was the point drove through his fatigue tunic and shirt, imbedded itself under the skin over his right ribs.

The feathered shaft dropped off, as it was fashioned to do.

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GUNFIRE broke out in the canyon between him and the four troopers. Thomas saw a rush of half-naked Navajos, faces painted black, the symbol of death. They came across the stream, cutting him off from flight downcanyon. Instantly Thomas quit his saddle, dropping to the ground and bringing his short gun into action. Several Navajos were close. More were darting from cover, hemming him in for the kill.

Thomas shot one, saw him fall, and ran to a hunk of sandstone offering better protection. Two Navajos ran to seize his horse. One he shot dead. The other, wounded, retired in behind a chunk of stone.

The troopers couldn't break through to him. They were firing their carbines steadily, but being forced to retreat slowly down the canyon. They were doing their best to break through to him, but a big force was after them.

Reloading, he prepared to defend himself for the rush that was coming. It came from two sides. Forced to clear the edge of the stone he stood free and fired until his gun was empty. It halted them, but now he faced their rifle fire. No bullets struck him, but chips from the rock flew off like hail.

Quickly he reloaded again, backing up, hoping to get around one of the bigger blocks of stone. But here again he never got the chance. Hearing a faint, slithering sound he wheeled, but only in time to catch the Navajo descending from the top of the stone.

Sunlight glinted on a brightly polished spear point. He saw the painted torso, the black face, and the snarling lips as the Navajo struck. Thomas was rushed backward against the big block of stone. The razor-sharp spear point came down at a slant, cutting through tunic and shirt, but because he was in motion he evaded the thrust partly. The point dug into his flesh under the left shoulder blade.

The Navajo withdrew the short spear, prepared to finish him off. Thomas got his gun part way up and fired, but missed in his desperate attempt at stopping the Navajo. The Indian jerked to one side in a half crouch. He paused, and Thomas shucked his right arm out of the sleeves of his torn clothing which hung from his back and neck, leaving his chest, neck and shoulders bare. Blood from his wounds glistened red in the sun. The throb of pain around the large arrow head was growing unbearable.

Thomas jerked his gun into firing position, and squeezed the trigger. The Navajo leaped suddenly several feet to the left. And the gun jammed!

Backing over to the face of the rock, Thomas sought frantically to get the gun going, but realizing his utter helplessness, mirrored in the hate-filled eyes of the Navajo.

The Indian measured his man and started the final lunge. He had taken two lightning-fast steps when a voice cried sharply from the left

"Taddytin!"

The voice sounded excited, incredulous, and again shouted explosively:

"Taddytin!"

Its effect on the spearman was instantaneous. He halted sharply, his black eyes staring at Thomas who was more surprised than he. And the officer's astonishment grew as he saw, twenty feet away, a big Navajo in split-legged trousers like those the spearman wore, his naked torso painted in many colors, his face blackened, who stood gaping at them. Behind him others rose from the ground, their weapons at rest in their hands.

The hate in the spearman's face gave way to an undecipherable emotion. The spear dropped to his side. He stared at Thomas unbelievingly, muttering:

"Taddytin!"

Turning, he trotted toward the big Navajo, passed him, and disappeared. The others followed. The last to go was the man who had first called out the magic word. Departing openly, he crossed the stream, lifted his head and emitted a babbling cry.

Then he was gone, and Thomas be-

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came aware that the firing which had dropped to occasional shots had ceased altogether. He leaned weakly against the stone. His wounds were bleeding, and the skirmish had left him gasping for breath.

XII

BULLY THOMAS looked around the silent canyon where he had faced death. That spearman had had only to plunge the spear into him. Yet one word had stopped him. Thomas couldn't understand it.

He recalled that the spearman's eyes had been on his neck, or chest. Thomas remembered then the little pouch hanging around his neck. It was incredible that that should have stopped the death fight, but it must have been the reason.

A talisman? A magic sign, or a great "medicine" of some kind? Whatever it was, Thomas knew that the pouch had saved his life. He had thought it only a whim when Kara had put it there. Now he began to realize that she had *known* what she was doing.

Thomas staggered to his horse. There he removed his torn tunic, tying it on his saddle, and pulled his shirt together to cover his chest.

Kneeling beside the stream, he washed the blood, sweat and dirt from his face. After a drink of water he felt better except for the pain under his right arm. Lifting to his feet, he saw a trooper step clear of some brush downstream. The three others, likewise dismounted, came up to him.

"We couldn't break through to you, sir," the foremost trooper said, "and they kept pilin' onto us. Then suddenly them redskins is gone. Strange the way they did it, sir."

Thomas only smiled tiredly as he mounted and rode downstream with the troopers to their own mounts. Silence was heavy in the canyon. No sign of Navajos there or in the partly concealed trail. Nor on the rim-overhead.

"Wait a minute," he said suddenly.

The troopers halted, in surprise.

"Wait here for me. I won't be in danger."

Reining around he went back up the stream at a trot to the scene of the skirmish. The moment he had turned his back the Navajos had darted in and removed their dead. Not one slain Indian lay anywhere in view.

Retracing his way, he led the troopers on into the main canyon. At the foot of the main trail up to the plateau he halted, hearing the noise of the returning patrol. Thomas dismounted, gesturing to the troopers to follow. He removed his shirt and lay down, exposing the large swelling knot around the arrow point.

"Take your knife and cut it out," he told the trooper.

"Sir, hadn't you better wait and let the surgeon handle it?"

Thomas smiled grimly. The cursed thing made riding almost impossible.

"I'll let him sew up the gash when we get in," he said.

The trooper bent over Thomas and made a quick, sure slash. The arrow head plopped out of the wound. It was the only way to remove it. Thomas could also count himself lucky. Most Navajo arrow wounds were fatal because of the shaft severing from the head, for its shape prevented its withdrawal. Such heads had to be cut out, and usually the operation was a major one. But this one was only under the skin over Thomas' ribs.

The trooper picked up the bloody head, wiped it off, and held it toward him.

"A souvenir, sir," he said.

Thomas dropped the gruesome thing into a pocket. He was replacing his clothing when the patrol trotted around a bend in the canyon.

"We thought we heard firing somewhere," the lieutenant began, eyeing Thomas' condition.

"We ran into trouble. Let's get back to the mountain now."

Thomas took the van. By the time they

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reached the plateau, the whole patrol knew about his wounds, and the lieutenant slowed down their progress.

In camp Thomas was attended by the surgeon, Stitches were taken in his right side and under the left shoulder.

THREE days later, when he was well enough to resume most of his activities, he began to grow concerned when no report had come in about Kara's visit to Black Wind. When he heard nothing by the end of the week he was on pins and needles.

Then Yarden and Greene returned. Greene had come so close to Lucero's gang that the wily whisky runner had been forced to split up his men, abandoning loose stock and pack equipment. The mounts of the ambushed troopers had been recovered, but it had not been possible for Greene to follow so many trails. Captain Yarden had joined Greene's patrol for several days, trying to locate Lucero, but the gang had escaped from the western Navajo country.

"One request, Colonel," Captain Yarden said drily. "When we do capture this rascal I want to fashion the noose around his neck. Tight."

Late that night Captain Yarden came to Thomas to announce:

"I find out from my scouts that Chacos Nez has been breaking arrest by slipping out of camp. He has been gone for the last two days, so I presume we can list him as a deserter."

Thomas called to the guard to bring Red Tommy. The young scout appeared, grinning, was told to sit down. Squatted on the ground, he rolled a wheat straw paper cigarette.

"It is strange to me that a Navajo would do these things to his own people," Thomas said, after telling him about the Company F scout.

"You forget it he is half Mexican," Red Tommy reminded. "Me, I think he is all Mexican!"

"There's something wrong here," Thomas told Captain Yarden. "Chacos Nez was, apparently, a good scout until the canyon episode when he suddenly turned on his own people, opened fire, and slyly let the troopers finish the job for him. His only purpose could have been to turn the Navajos so solidly against us in hatred that they would never consider surrendering, or coming in voluntarily. Who would that benefit?"

"He is the man Dobahuzsin suspects of being a spy for Lucero," Red Tommy put in somberly. "I think so, too. But we have not yet found enough to prove it. What you think?"

"And he is one of my scouts!" Captain Yarden got to his feet, swore, and started pacing the dirt floor of the tent.

Red Tommy drew a few puffs on his cigarette.

"I think maybe one scout knows all about Chacos Nez," he said. "If he talks, we would know."

"Go get him."

The scout arose to his moccasined feet and departed. Captain Yarden faced Thomas.

"The only man who could possibly benefit by this would be Lucero," he said grimly. "But how?"

Thomas told him about the whisky delivery deal when a spy from the camp in the valley at Fort Defiance had raced away ahead of the patrol.

"It is to Lucero's interest to keep the Navajo country embroiled," he said. "And he hates the army. He knows what will happen to him when we get our hands on him."

"And it had to be one of *my* scouts who turned traitor!" Captain Yarden fumed.

Red Tommy returned with a short, heavy-set Navajo who wore a revolver in a holster, a cast-off army coat sans chevrons, and a worried expression. The two scouts squatted on the ground, and rolled smokes.

When Thomas began talking he dwelt long on Lucero's evil ways, knowing these men had a deep interest in the welfare of their tribesmen. The older scout listened impassively until Thomas fin-

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ished, then spoke a few words to Red Tommy.

"He says," Red Tommy duly reparted, "that when Chacos Nez left here he said he was going to join his boss." Red Tommy added that the old scout couldn't say to whom Chacos Nez had told that.

"He knows Chacos Nez was spying for Lucero all the time?" Thomas asked. "He is the man we saw racing away that night to warn him that a patrol was coming to the whisky camp?"

Red Tommy spoke to the other scout.

"Yes," he reported. "This man saw him leave that night in a hurry. He did not ask him later what his business was. But after Dobahuzsin and me got to looking at their horses' tracks, why Chacos Nez changed his pony's shoes."

SO THEY knew now that Lucero had sent one of his own men to get a job as scout with Company F.

The scouts were dismissed, and Captain Yarden took himself off. Thomas was preparing to roll into his blankets when Dobahuzsin walked into the tent.

"Kara is all right?" Thomas asked the old scout quickly.

"Yes. You come now?" The scout seemed somewhat anxious.

"You mean to Black Wind's camp, as late as it is now?" Thomas asked.

"Yes. Now. Alone."

"Black Wind is willing to come in?"

"No savvy that. He talk to you. We ride now?"

Black Wind wanted to make a deal. That was most important. While his horse was being brought, Captain Yarden was sent for. As Thomas tied a rolled blanket behind his saddle he told Yarden to assume command until his return. He did not know how long he would be gone, but supposed only a day or so.

"We-el," Yarden drawled, "don't trust them murdering devils too far."

"I've an open truce. Nothing will happen to me."

"Them redskins would like to get their hands on you, Colonel."

Swinging into saddle, Thomas returned the captain's salute and rode off behind Dobahuzsin on his mustang pony. Under the stars they went off the mountain, turning southwest on the plateau. Dobahuzsin rode in a hurry for the next seven or eight miles, but on reaching a fork of Navajo Canyon he slowed to a walk. Thomas surmised he was giving far-out guards a chance to recognize them.

Arriving at a break over the solid stone rim, Dobahuzsin took down it. The trail slanted from shelf to shelf, turning back on the final descent.

Gray showed in the eastern sky when they struck west over the sandy floor into the wide, main canyon. An empty sheep corral materialized beside the way. Beyond it were several cornfields. Stalks, from which the ears had been pulled, rustled with the rising morning breeze.

Dobahuzsin guided downstream toward the Colorado River. Short of it he turned into a defile, and just as day broke they rode in behind an elongated mass of stone apart from the canyon wall. Concealed between the walls lay an extensive camp. Thomas could see hogans and open camps all along the narrow canyon. There were no campfires, no odor of recent ones in the crisp air.

When they stopped beside a small hogan a Navajo youth appeared from behind it. Dobahuzsin spoke to him as they dismounted, and the youth took Thomas's bridle reins, leading his horse out of the pocket.

"All right," Dobahuzsin said to Thomas. "He bring back when you want."

The small hogan was built of stones, the bee-hive-shaped top of poles covered with dirt the color of the canyon floor.

"You stay here," Dobahuzsin said, and left him.

Thomas entered the hogan with his blanket. He had laid it out, intending to rest a while when Kara appeared at the entrance. He walked outside to greet her. The rising light showed her smile as she touched his arms.

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"Is there a chance to get him to surrender?" he asked.

"We'll see," she replied. "I . . . We heard of the fight over in the other canyon."

"Yes." He pulled the arrow head from his pocket. "This is a memento of that occasion. Now I want to ask you, what does *'Taddytin'* mean?"

Her smile departed, and she stared at him.

"Are you sure that is the right word?" she asked, but he sensed deliberate evasion.

"I'm sure that's the word I heard them speak. They said it several times. It is one Navajo word that's easy to pronounce, to remember."

"Perhaps." She pulled the shoulder robe about her, squaw fashion. Definitely she wasn't going to discuss the matter. As she turned away she said, "Sleep now. After you eat Black Wind will talk."

When she was gone he reentered the hogan, and did doze for awhile. It was almost noon when a Navajo girl brought in a pan of bread, roasted mutton ribs and corn. He ate, rolled a smoke and sauntered outside.

DOBAHUZSIN, who had apparently been loitering near, moseyed closer and motioned. Thomas walked to meet him and accompanied him up to the secret camp. Men, most of them wearing war paint, and women and children, sat in silent groups. They observed him carefully, aware of every movement he made as they studied him. Their expressions told him nothing. When he looked directly at any one of them, eyes were hastily averted.

Dobahuzsin turned a corner of the canyon wall, entering a small basin. Sitting in a line under stunted piñon trees were four Navajos. The chief, Black Wind, sat a little apart. He did not look up as Thomas approached.

Black Wind was a big man, over six feet tall, and heavily built. He wore the usual split-legged, Spanish type trousers, fastened with a silver belt. His torso was bare, but still retained traces of vermillion, yellow and black paint. Both cheeks were daubed a deep russet red, ending in stripes about the mouth. There were turquoises in his hair, and attached to his left ear.

Dobahuzsin drifted aside as Kara walked over to stand close to Thomas' side and speak to Black Wind. Obviously she was explaining who Thomas was. Black Wind asked one question, still without glancing directly at the army man.

"He wants to know if you will shake hands," Kara explained.

This was a good sign, and Thomas quickly replied: "Yes. I do not consider him an enemy."

Only then did Black Wind favor him with a look. He arose, and held out his hand, which Thomas accepted. When the chief again squatted on the ground, Thomas sat down himself. So did Kara, within an arm's reach of Thomas, and facing the four silent Navajos.

"I am afraid he is still undecided," Kara said to Thomas in a low voice. "I have listened and talked to him all this past week. It seems that he has been promised guns and whisky if he will hold out against the soldiers."

"I detect Lucero's hand."

Kara shook her head. "I haven't been able to find out where the arms and whisky are to come from," she said. "He has been trying to get Muddy Waters to join him in this talk. At first Muddy Waters appeared to be agreed, but at the last minute he sent word that Black Wind must continue to resist. He is not coming in on any deal Black Wind may make with you. And he has sent word to my uncle he has sworn to chase the soldiers out of the country, or kill them."

Thomas smiled at the audacity of that red chieftain. Muddy Waters must believe himself to be a desert general. But Kara did not smile. She knew Muddy Waters would try to keep his word, and that he had the men and the guns to do it provided he was shrewd

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enough to handle them properly.

"Your uncle is willing to come in?" Thomas asked her.

"He is only willing to talk," Kara replied.

When she ceased speaking, Black Wind began to talk. He did so at great length, his voice rising and falling as he expressed himself. Often he made motions with his hands. Kara listened without any expression whatever, her face as solemn and dead-pan as those of the other Navajos.

Dobahuzsin approached Kara, and sat down on the ground beside her.

"My uncle says," began Kara, and halted. A cloud crossed her face. "It's the same old stuff," she went on dully. "A full listing of their grievances. But, Colonel, I'll tell you anyway, in detail as he proceeds."

XIII

BLACK WIND, so Kara told Thomas, declared that the troops had come into Navajo country without any warning, Navajo sheep, cattle, horses and mules had been seized and given to the alien Indians with the army. Navajo corn fields had been destroyed, peach trees cut down, homes burned. People had been slain, or made prisoner, and some had been sold into slavery.

The western Navajos had learned that those captured, or who surrendered, were robbed, beaten and driven like sheep to Fort Sumner. There they were half-starved, diseased, cold and dying. Black Wind said he cried in his heart against subjecting his people to such punishment.

He talked throughout a tiresome afternoon. Once he declared that when the Americans had arrived to overcome the New Mexicans that the Navajos had helped them. Then the Americans had turned on the Navajos.

When sundown came, they quit to eat. Afterward Black Wind said he was tired. He would resume in the morning. Thomas found himself alone, for even Kara remained away from him.

The second day was a repetition of the first, and there was a like one-sided talk on the third day. It was not until late in the afternoon that Black Wind paused, and appeared to be waiting for an answer.

"Tell him," Thomas said to Kara, "all these things may be true. I do not know. I am a fighting man. I have been sent to bring all the Navajos in this region to Fort Defiance. That I intend to do."

Black Wind did not bat an eye when he heard the ultimatum. Thomas suspected him of stalling for time for some reason not connected with this long powwow.

"Ask him if he has seen flashes of light through the sky?"

Kara had to explain about the heliograph signals to the chief. He merely nodded.

"Tell him that when the order for me to move my troopers comes, I will send men to all the mesas, buttes, and mountains, men with more of those mirrors. They will be able to see all the movements of Navajos. Troopers who will go to wherever the Navajos try to hide. There will be no escape once we start."

There was no reply. So far, Black Wind had made no reference whatsoever to the killing of the women and children in the Chacos Nez debacle. He apparently was holding back to delay a showdown. It would soon be November, the month of snow. A deep snow would put an end to effective pursuit by the troopers, if their campaign could be delayed long enough.

"I came here to discuss his coming in with his band," Thomas told Kara somberly. "I do not wish harm to befall his people—and he hasn't even mentioned the women and children who were killed through treachery. I have wasted enough time listening to him. Tomorrow morning I return to my base camp to await orders to begin the roundup."

Kara interpreted to her uncle. Black Wind remained as stolid as before, though Thomas sensed that Kara was

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pleading with him to listen to reason. Dobahuzsin had his say, too, but still Black Wind did not loosen up.

Rising to his feet finally, Thomas strolled away.

After a time, in the blue-black night, the camp quieted down until hardly a rustle could be heard in the hidden pocket. There were more than two hundred people in hiding here, yet so careful were they that no sound, no unguarded fires revealed their location. As Thomas drifted off to sleep he realized that it was going to be a big task to root out the Navajos.

He was asleep when movement near the hogan brought him awake. It was long past midnight. Sitting up in his blanket, he listened. He heard two men approaching the hogan, one almost silently, which meant moccasins, the other tramping in heavy boots. Thomas dived hurriedly into his clothing.

AS THEY passed the open hogan door, he heard Spanish words clear in the night air, then a laughing answer in the same tongue. He edged to the door, looking out.

The backs of two men were toward him. One was bareheaded, the other wore a black beaver hat. Chacos Nez he recognized. The other being a white man he instantly docketed as one of Lucero's men. A renegade here in Black Wind's camp with some message importuning him with promises to fight the troopers.

Thomas slipped out of the hogan on the balls of his feet. His right hand dropped to his gun. The two men stopped where their horses were tied, unfastened the bridle reins. Chacos Nez, preparing to mount, spotted Thomas almost upon them.

He spoke a word of warning. The other man turned—to face Thomas' leveled gun.

"Bring your hands up carefully," Thomas warned.

"What do you think you're doin', soldier?" snarled the man.

"Raise your hands!" Thomas snapped.

The pair obeyed, remaining quiet when he warned them to silence. Thomas disarmed them, tossing their weapons aside.

"Move ahead of me back to camp," he ordered crisply.

"You won't get away with this!" the white man protested angrily.

They had passed Thomas' hogan when in the starlight, twenty Navajo men promptly surrounded them. All bore arms of some description. More and more appeared, but kept their distance from Thomas' prisoners. Thomas kept them moving, and Navajos drew aside to let them advance.

"Now you see what will happen?" the white man chuckled derisively. "They'll beat your cussed brains out!"

"The first move made toward me and I'll shoot you!" Thomas warned. "Chacos Nez after you."

At least one Navajo understood. He repeated what Thomas said to the others who drew further away.

The upper camp was stirring awake when Thomas reached it. In a center cleared portion he halted. Dobahuzsin appeared immediately, and Kara was behind Black Wind who strode up furiously.

He started talking in a high-pitched voice, but Thomas interrupted.

"I'll do the talking this time!" he said shortly. "Kara, tell him I want these two men delivered to me. Instead of shooting them down, I am paying him the respect of asking him for them, since he is in command here."

Kara spoke to Black Wind who rasped out:

"Why does he want these men? They have been given a truce to enter my camp as well as he has!"

"This white renegade here is one of Blas Lucero's gang," Thomas answered. "He is wanted on suspicion of murder." Again he explained why the army intended to arrest all of that whisky-running gang.

"The Navajo?" Black Wind demanded.

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"He is a deserter, the scout responsible for the killing of the Navajo's women and children in the canyon days ago. He treacherously got the troopers into that fight. For that crime, and for being a spy for Lucero, I demand custody of him."

Dobahuzsin began talking to Black Wind fast and earnestly. The old scout's voice cracked with anger. He, too, demanded that the pair be taken immediately as prisoners to the base camp. Only then did the white renegade display signs of uneasiness. Lucero might not have the right influence with Black Wind.

"Tell Black Wind," Thomas said to Kara, "that even now there are many columns of soldiers such as the one already here who are entering the great Navajo country. Soldiers will continue to come until they capture all hold-out Indians, and remove all renegades, such as these. Lucero will never be able to slip arms and whisky through again. He'll be dead, and there won't be anyone left to sell such stuff to!"

Kara spoke quietly, yet Thomas detected an eager enthusiasm in her voice. As she talked, Black Wind bent his eagle piercing eyes upon Thomas, shifted them to the prisoners, then lifted his head to look into nothing.

"We will talk in the daytime," Black Wind decided.

"We decide now!" Thomas said harshly. "I am here at your request to powwow, only because." —he pointed at Kara— "she, a Navajo, and her father, the commandant at Fort Defiance, would like to avoid bloodshed, save your people. I have dallied, hoping you would see the light, but it seems plain you cannot. Therefore I am returning to my profession—fighting!"

BEFORE Kara began to interpret, he was almost certain she hid a smile. She spoke, forcefully, as if as much impressed by Thomas' detemination as were Black Wind and the other Navajos.

The white renegade tried to break in. Thomas collared the man, lifting him off the ground and shaking him as a ferret would shake a rat. When Kara finished, Black Wind gestured at the man, who began a lengthy harangue. He was promptly interrupted by Dobahuzsin, who proved himself a forceful speaker too. Thomas could not understand the words, but the old scout certainly seemed to be giving Black Wind some plain talk. Dobahuzsin ended with a short, angry snort, and stalked away.

Black Wind gave an order. The white prisoner began yelling and protesting as Navajo warriors seized him and Chacos Nez. Both were hurled to the ground, their hands tied behind their backs. A handful of sand was thrown into the white renegade's mouth to stop his squalling.

Chacos Nez did not make a single protest, though tying a man's hands together was the greatest insult that could be offered a Navajo. The two hustled away.

"What will the army do with Lucero when they catch him?" Black Wind wanted to know solemnly.

"Hang him," Thomas answered.

"Muddy Waters?"

"If captured he will be treated as a prisoner of war, for he is at war with us."

"He will not be executed?"

"No. He will be imprisoned along with all the others."

Black Wind turned on his heels, stalking away. The other Navajos walked off leaving Thomas alone with Kara.

"I gather Black Wind is not going to surrender," he said to her. "Nor will I get those two prisoners."

"We have neither lost, nor won," she decided. "That New Mexican renegade came from Lucero to tell Black Wind there are columns operating in the eastern Navajo country."

"They are asking Black Wind to continue resistance."

"Yes. This one brought in a keg of whisky on a pack mule, as a present to my uncle. But Black Wind took an ax

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and knocking out the head of the keg, poured the whisky into the sand. He said to Lucero's man, 'You see how it wets the ground like water? I see it like blood on the ground!' He surprised me."

"This means he is inclined favorably toward us?"

Kara shook her head. If Black Wind obeyed his own inclinations, he would fight to the bitter end. The Navajo believed in himself so strongly he would not take orders from others.

Thomas returned to the hogan, lying down fully dressed. At dawn he roused, rolling his blanket. Outside, he found his horse saddled and tied to a tree. Strapping on the blanket, he checked the cinches, then walked to the camp. At the first family group Kara sat with her aunt eating breakfast. A place was made for him. They had coffee, which was surprising. The full meal had been cooked over a concealed fire before dawn.

Finishing, he got to his feet, glancing at Kara and her aunt. Kara smiled, and said they would be returning to the base camp with him. Dobahuzsin rode in on his pony, leading mounts for the women.

Thomas said to Dobahuzsin, "I guess we don't get the prisoners?"

The old scout shrugged. "They go free last night."

A murmuring sound arose higher in the camp. Then from above strode Black Wind, a ragged blanket over his shoulders. He faced Thomas. His mouth opened and words fell from it. An extensive speech, but not a slow one this time.

FOR HIMSELF, he said he was content to fight. His warriors were of the same mind. However, he was thinking of what was best for the women and children. Furthermore, his band had considerable property. If he surrendered to the army he feared the alien Indians would rob them immediately.

"There are no Indians, other than the scouts, with the army," Thomas replied.

Black Wind went on to say that if he was guaranteed safety for the people who surrendered, that they could retain their sheep, cattle and horses to feed themselves, and if they were given a separate piece of ground at Fort Sumner where they would live by themselves, then he would consider the matter.

"I will guarantee the security of person and property, for all who come in," Thomas replied. "A treaty on these terms cannot be made without orders from General Carleton."

"Then why have you come here to make peace with me?" Black Wind demanded. "When you have no say in this matter? Maybe you would rather fight?"

Thomas smiled thinly. "I will protect all who come in," he answered. "On the terms you propose only General Carleton can decide, but I know they would be Colonel Sudhoff's recommendation. I came here to take back word to be flashed to the colonel. Now too much time has been lost. The army is moving. Black Wind should return with me to camp where we will send the message to Fort Defiance."

Black Wind thought it over. Then without even glancing in Thomas' direction he turned away.

Kara gathered the shawl around her shoulders and followed her aunt to the horses. Thomas got his own horse, and was turning into the trail as they joined him.

Dobahuzsin took the lead, moving slowly. Because he refrained from looking to the rear Thomas suspicioned he expected some development. At the base of the trail the old scout halted long enough to smoke a cigarette. His black eyes twinkled once at Thomas.

"Why the delay?" Thomas asked Kara quietly. "Is it possible Black Wind may yet change his mind and come in?"

"We hope so, for he has made no decision," she replied.

"Maybe so," Dobahuzsin spoke up. "He thinks much."

Kara smiled as she nodded toward the old scout. "He has spent hours telling Black Wind what a great fighter you

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are, Colonel. He warned him that when you started there will be no chance for the Navajos."

"It didn't impress the chief much?"

"He has a lingering doubt that maybe he would make a mistake choosing your side, instead of that of Muddy Waters. So he is waiting to see if Muddy Waters can make good his brags."

The climb upward was necessarily slow. Breaking the rim up on the level, Dobahuzsin dismounted, and sneaked to the rim in a crouch. He stared over loose rock for several minutes, and when he backed away this time he was in a hurry. Swinging up on the back of his pony, he smiled.

"He come!"

They moved into the blue sagebrush of the plateau with Navajo Mountain grim before them. At a trot they had covered a mile when up from low ground appeared Lieutenant Greene with a patrol of ten men. Green rode up, grinning hugely.

"Was beginning to get anxious about you, sir," he said. "Came out for a look-see. Captain Yarden has been threatening to send in a platoon to yank you out of Black Wind's camp!"

Abruptly the troopers sitting saddles behind him became interested in the direction of the canyon. Thomas shifted around on his horse. Black Wind, accompanied by two men, rode leisurely toward them. Greene's eyes mirrored a question.

"The chief is coming in to pow-wow some more," Thomas explained. "Let's ride!"

XIV

GIVEN a place in the center of the camp with his companions, Black Wind was turned over to Dobahuzsin, while Thomas went to the heliograph station. His first message was a personal one to Colonel Sudhoff informing him that Kara would remain with the column for the time being. Another message relayed Black Wind's terms for surrender. Personally, Thomas found those terms reasonable.

In reply Thomas was told to use his best judgment and make a deal with the chief if possible. So he informed Black Wind that a "peace paper" would be signed on their arrival at Fort Defiance. Still Black Wind did not once give his decision to come in. He only talked about it. As Thomas was leaving him an orderly handed him a message. It was from General Carleton, and read:

CLEAN OUT THE CANYONS AND BEGIN SWEEPING EASTWARD AS PER PRIOR INSTRUCTIONS.

Turning back to the squatting Navajos, Thomas was smiling. Through Red Tommy, who was doing the interpreting instead of Kara, he told Black Wind that tomorrow morning the chief's band, with all the stock they wanted to take with them, and their other possessions, must join the column on the march eastward. All patrols would have orders to let them alone. Black Wind had sufficient fighting men of his own in the bare possibility his band might be attacked by renegades.

"Tomorrow at dawn we proceed to capture or kill all who resist," were Thomas' final words.

When he returned to his tent, Kara sought him there hopefully.

"I know no more definitely than I ever did," he told her. "Maybe he will surrender, and maybe he won't."

Thomas summoned his officers to tell them they were moving. Plans had long ago been outlined. All that remained was to put them in order. A guard would remain with the signal corps men at the heliograph station. Other signal corps men would proceed to the high points from which they could flash messages. Captain Yarden would take the north canyons, Thomas the south. Each would operate several patrols.

The camp became all bustle to pack equipment, provisions and muster the patrols. Dobahuzsin came in with two Company F scouts to report Indian sign

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everywhere. The scouts had located the hiding place of a considerable body of Navajos up on the mountain, from which spies could slip out to observe the camp of the troopers.

Thomas informed all the scouts that during the campaign Dobahuzsin would be chief of scouts, and he ordered the horse guard doubled.

Captain Yarden's eyes crinkled at Thomas as he filled his pipe.

"You think this Chief Muddy Waters would dare come up on these heights to attack us?"

"He's wasted enough time watching and maneuvering," Thomas replied. "He's bragged he will drive us out of the country. Lucero has furnished him with better arms. If he has to come up here after us, he will, though his best course would be to wait until we split up into small groups, then wipe them out one at a time."

"Yes, but the chief doesn't know those signals will take care of any such large movement of his men. Or does he?"

Thomas smiled grimly. "I hope for his sake that Lucero hasn't overdone the job of making him believe he can whip the United States Army!"

When supper was over, Thomas and Kara took a walk through the soft night to the heliograph point. From the rim they could see over the canyon country lying like a great cloak under the stars. Kara stood silent, stirred at its awesome beauty. He smoked quietly.

AFTER a while he found her eyes observing him gravely. Abruptly he began talking about the skirmish in the canyon when one magic word had saved his life.

"What puzzles you about it?" she asked.

"That word—*taddytin*. What does it mean? What is the meaning of the pouch I am wearing?"

"The word is the name of what you wear," she said.

"No magic?" He laughed lightly. He felt her serious gaze upon him.

"Don't scoff," she said. "It was a whim of mine to get you to wear it."

"Whatever it is, it worked, or I would be a dead man. The Navajos, bent on killing me, had me helpless, but stopped and withdrew after one of them called out that word."

"Only because they happened to be Black Wind's fighting men. Had they been Muddy Waters' warriors, nothing could have saved you."

Quietly he watched her. But he could plainly see that she wasn't going to tell him any more.

Moving close to her, his arms went around her blanketed shoulders. She lifted her head, stared at him, but her arms beneath the blanket folds did not move. Nor did she resist when he lowered his head and kissed her lips. There was not the slightest response, though. He might as well have been kissing a Dresden doll. Thomas felt both ashamed and slightly angered. He turned away.

"I'm sorry," he said contritely.

She did not answer, did not even show any resentment. A strange girl, one he did not understand, but wanted to.

It was a long time before he could get to sleep that night, thinking of her strange ways. Twice she had saved him from deep embarrassment—or worse—and once she had indirectly saved his life. But she appeared wholly unconcerned about him personally, except for that one moment when she had tied the pouch around his neck. . . .

Hours later, when he awakened, the night had turned from crisp to cold. Dressing, he strolled outside. A faint light showed in the guards' tent where a lieutenant from Company F had the duty.

The half-dozen men in the tent were making coffee. He had a cup, afterward walking around headquarters. It was after two in the morning. A cloudless, dark sky made a dome overhead in which stars and a rounding moon of surprising magnitude shone brilliantly.

He had walked almost to the edge of

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the camp where the troopers slept when Dobahuzsin and another scout appeared through the shadows of the pine forest, walking hurriedly. They saw him and turned in his direction.

"They come," Dobahuzsin said simply as they halted.

"They? Navajos?" Thomas spoke with swift apprehension.

"Yes. They come up on the mountain."

"How many?"

"No see. Savvy place where they come up."

Dobahuzsin turned as a sound hardly perceivable to others reached his trained ears. From the gloom of the forest Red Tommy appeared.

"You savvy plenty trouble?" he demanded.

"How soon will they attack?" Thomas asked.

"Some time yet. Just before dawn. After the clouds come with the morning wind."

"Where are they?"

"On east side of mountain, above War God Spring."

The Navajo force was yet some distance off, would probably remain there until the moment for attack. Had Red Tommy seen them?

"Our scout hiding over there," Red Tommy explained, "does not report. That means they are between him and us. He can't get through, so he's got to come all the way around to the north."

"You think he will know the strength of their force, and will come in?"

When Red Tommy had said "No report," Thomas knew he referred to bird or animal cries as signals.

"He slip through," Red Tommy added confidently. "Pretty soon now we know how many Muddy Waters has brought along."

THE horses were grazing in the dish-shaped crest of the mountain. This meadow was the first logical place the Navajos would attack, to seize the stock and put the troopers afoot. Likely both attacks would come simultaneously.

"We'd better move the horses," Thomas said, and had started away when Dobahuzsin stopped him.

"Let Indian do it," he suggested. "Drift like grazing. They no savvy we know yet."

Thomas understood. The horses would be cunningly eased down through the timber and in behind it for safety. If a spy were around he would not realize that the troopers were aware of the presence of Navajos on the mountain.

"Wait!" exclaimed Thomas. "I'll send a man with you to quiet the doubled guard that's on tonight."

At the guard tent he gave a corporal instructions. The trooper hurried off to join the scouts.

Entering the tent, Thomas ordered:

"I want Captain Yarden awakened quietly. Then all the other officers one by one. No excitement, understand? No unusual activity around this tent either. They will meet me over near my own."

"What's up, sir?" exclaimed the lieutenant.

"We're in for trouble."

Turning out, Thomas walked to his own darkened tent. Out of the night came Sergeant Jube Herlits, stepping softly.

"I can smell them," he said in a half-whisper.

"Just the man I need," Thomas replied. "Sergeant, we're going to have a fight before the sun is up!"

"I been feelin' it in my bones!"

Thomas gave Herlits his orders. All troopers on the north side of the camp were to be awakened carefully, arm themselves and proceed a hundred yards into the deeper forest. There they were to dig in, provide a barricade with rocks, logs, brush, dirt; anything that could be made into a breastworks. No lights, no sounds. Nothing must give advance notice the camp was aware of the coming attack.

Herlits went away quickly. Captain Yarden appeared immediately.

"So it has come, after all," he said.

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The other officers approached and Thomas explained to them quietly. Two minutes later they were scurrying away to arouse their sergeants who would proceed to awaken the rest of the camp without noise. Yarden took over duty at the guard tent.

Despite the care with which the noncoms proceeded, a faint stirring did arise. Yet Thomas doubted it could be heard far from the camp, as he observed troopers moving ghostlike through the shadows.

Against the light of the stars he saw a horse framed through an opening in the timber. Another followed, slowly, then more. The stock was being successfully driven to where Muddy Waters' men could not get to them. If the attackers did not break through.

Red Tommy brought in the scout who had been stationed above War God Spring.

"They have moved on to the spring now," Red Tommy reported. "This man, he sees them. Many, many fighting men with Muddy Waters. All armed with new rifles!"

Thomas pondered. The spring was more than a mile distant from the camp. Likely he had time to extend his line all the way across through the timber.

"When you hear night hawk cry, don't move," Red Tommy warned. "Night hawk cry, I make him. Muddy Waters coming in then."

"Won't that give it away we're waiting for them?"

"They no savvy night hawk cry is by me. They no use night hawk talk for signals."

"On your way," said Thomas. "Don't get caught out there."

"Me? I run!" Red Tommy, who would do no such thing, vanished with his companion.

COLONEL THOMAS ordered Yarden to move more troopers over on the flanks. A lieutenant was delegated to each wing, and men summoned. When Sergeant Herlits reported that the troopers had made themselves a good cover, Thomas told him to pass the word to listen for the cry of a night hawk. Utter silence thereafter. No firing until the Navajos were upon them.

"I'll take the center in the line," Thomas told Yarden. "Send Greene to the right wing."

"How about me?" Yarden asked sourly.

Thomas chuckled. "I'm giving you the biggest job. Hold the camp, and bring up the reserves in time to save our hides. I don't believe we can possibly hold their first do-or-die charge."

Passing his own tent, he went toward the one occupied by Kara and her aunt. Two heavy logs made a barricade on the north side. He suspected Sergeant Herlits' thoughtfulness.

Kara, fully dressed, stepped from the flaps. Behind her hovered her aunt.

"You are expecting trouble?" Kara asked.

"Muddy Waters came up on the mountain with all his fighting men," he replied. "He is approaching now, the scouts claim. Will you stay down inside your tent behind the logs when bullets fly?"

She hesitated, then said, "Yes," and turned back into the tent.

Thomas walked from the north end of camp through the sighing pines into what had become a quickly built front line. He ducked behind a four-foot log where troopers, their faces blackened with damp earth, were digging a trench. Herlits moved over to him in a crouch.

"I thought you'd be around pretty quick, Colonel!"

"Powder in the blood, stuff?"

"Well, yes, sir!"

Fishing into a shirt pocket, Thomas touched his tobacco sack, and quickly stopped. Herlits understood.

"You ever notice how many troopers in the West fightin' Injuns chew instead of smokin'?" he asked.

"No—I'm new out here."

"Well, sir, just on account of nights like this when they can't smoke!"

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Sitting with his back to the log, Thomas stuck his legs into the new trench, settled down for the necessary wait. A tingle of anxiety went through him. Yet when he surveyed the sky, it was still a dark void. Not yet, he thought, and recalled other nights when he had waited for an attack to materialize.

The woods here were more open than those of northern Virginia. Men could come through. But Johnny Reb had come through those thorny patches of timber too, when experienced men claimed it couldn't be done. The trouble was, the Southerners did just about everything they were supposed not to be able to do. Like the Navajo tonight. Muddy Waters daring to charge a great camp with, in comparison with Thomas' command, a wholly inadequate force.

Waiting was always tough, and so it was here. But eventually something like a pall of smoke appeared in the sky. It grew rapidly, swirling and pluming over the world.

From deep in the forest the cry of a night hawk fell on the clear morning air. It came a second time, and a third, drifting away through the timber and dying into nothing, simulating a bird on the wing.

It was a familiar cry, the sound of the night hawk. Yet to the men who had been waiting for it, an ominous heralding of swift events to follow. A dull, dead silence settled over the area. Clouds steadily blotted out the stars. The lantern deliberately left burning in the guard tent showed in a dull glow through the canvas walls. No movement revealed an aroused camp.

None of the scouts came in, probably cut off. The troopers were left without knowledge of the approaching Navajos. No faint sound came out of the forest. That the Indians were out there, however, no one doubted.

The Navajo warrior could move with the silence of a wraith, the speed of such a ghostly being.

Thomas crouched, with his eyes glued to an inch-wide opening near the root end of the log. As the minutes ticked on he began to feel impatient. Would they perhaps for once, charge on their ponies? He doubted this. He had been told too often their first attack always was from the ground, attempting surprise with their skill at creeping into enemy lines, appearing with devastating suddenness wielding knife and lance before shooting alarmed the defense. Such assaults had vanquished many an enemy. He expected this to happen now, with their mounted men plunging in after resistance started.

Clouds rolled over the sky covering the entire dome of the heavens. Soon false dawn would be at hand, then the big blackness preceding sunrise.

No sound reached his ears. Nothing moved that he could detect, yet suddenly he sensed that something was behind his log. Glancing backward, he froze to immobility. Up above that log rose the blackened face of an Indian, a knife gleaming between his teeth. A knife ground sharp on both edges to within a couple of inches of the leather handle!

XV

IN THAT one bare second other Indians were making the discovery this Navajo had. The troopers were waiting for them! Thomas acted in that mere breath. His bullet went in under the Navajo's chin, tearing off the close-fitting war cap decorated with fur and feathers. The Indian raised up, pitched backward to the ground without uttering a cry.

As if at a signal, a dozen guns roared along the defense line. Simultaneously above them rose the dreaded war cry of the Navajo, echoing and reechoing. An eerie sound that was everywhere, yet nowhere.

Then, from where they had crawled, up sprang the knife men before the troopers. No hoped-for surprises would aid them now to deal out death. They knew that, but rushed the barricade anyway. They came up and over, swinging knife and short lance. Guns roared con-

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stantly. Men fell in the close fighting. So furious was the desperate onslaught that the Navajos knocked holes in the line before they could be stopped.

After the terrible war cry the bugle lifted piercingly urgent notes on the air. It kept blaring as the reserve troopers rushed in. The Navajos broke only when death sapped the strength of their arms. A good many withdrew, however, though wounded.

In the farther timber rifles roared in reply to the trooper's fire. Bullets whined angrily along the breastworks. The night was stabbed with constant powder flashes. As the troopers were forced down, mounted Navajos rode out of the woods.

They did not charge in grand style, recklessly expending their lives as did the Plains Indians. These Navajo rode in to kill, or be killed. When they did charge, it was only to topple over barricades and into the trench. That slowed them, but did not stop them.

The left wing extending into the west was breached. The heaviest force on ponies struck there. They poured through the gap, heading for the horse herd. Thomas, fighting and keeping the center of the line intact, tried to pull out. They must not lose the cavalry mounts!

He had started to form a rallying point when from the camp another bugle lifted on the air. It gave one call, "Charge!" and charge those troopers did. Captain Yarden, having mounted part of his reserve force, turned them loose. This was a stunning surprise to the Navajos racing for the stock. They drew up, having all they could do trying to get out of the path of the hurricane sweeping upon them.

The Navajos broke, and tried to get back through the hole in the line. Some did, but the troopers rode them down, chasing them into the timber. But, inside the line, other Navajos were delivering death to the troopers.

The bugle blared urgently—recall. The ground fighters were forced to withhold their fire while the mounted troopers were out, so men dropped back, retreating in order inside the camp area.

While the troopers got a moment's breathing spell, Thomas checked his line quickly. Greene had held. Not much of the fury of the charge hit his wing. Dead ponies lay before the barricade. The bodies of Navajos, too. Yet where Thomas previously had seen five beyond the log, only two remained. By magic the dead had disappeared.

The shooting increased in intensity and the troopers again leaped to battle. Navajos on the ground were creeping up once more to close quarters. The costly charge on ponies taught them they were not going to get inside the camp mounted. The rifles of the Navajos lying prone behind the boles of pine trees opened up not over twenty feet away.

A curious wavering hoot, repeated four times, lifted behind the battle line. Promptly the Navajos redoubled their firing. Through it a furious sound of skirmishing broke out when the attackers were seeking a weak place to break through. Greene was holding there, and Thomas dispatched twenty men to his aid.

Suddenly the firing slacked off in the center and the west. For a minute or so longer the battle raged at Greene, then that, too, fell off. To the north no rifle or gun cracked. A strange, gloomy silence pervaded there. Gradually the troopers ceased firing themselves.

THOMAS got out the wounded. Some who were only scratched refused to budge. But a large number of seriously wounded men were carried out. The surgeon sent Thomas word he would need an operating tent.

"Tell him to kick the stuff out of mine and use it!" Thomas told the messenger.

Only four tents had been brought along. All of those except the one used by Kara and her aunt were taken over.

Thomas waited for a resumption of the attack, a nerve-wracking wait. But it did not last long. A trooper stirring behind the line fell dead as the crash of

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the rifle echoed in the timber.

Behind it others erupted, sweeping all along the line. The Navajos were back! No cries, no yelling, urged those warriors on. Apparently there never needed to be. Thomas guessed they had taken a terrific beating when they had run head-on into his formed line, but they were still unconvinced they couldn't force the troopers back into their camp. If that could be done, victory was assured.

A stab was made at the left wing again, in an attempt to maneuver around the flank. When it failed, desperate tries reached for the center once more. The Navajos got over the barricades among the troopers. And those Indians who failed to retreat, died.

They just didn't retreat. They came, fought, and died.

Wearily, Thomas saw another onslaught abate its fury as the Navajos dissolved into the forest. Then utter silence reigned.

"That will be all now," Herlits said beside Thomas. He pointed to the east. "Look! They won't come again."

A streak of deep yellow lay on the horizon. The dawn clouds were vanishing. Thomas stared around at the havoc revealed by the growing light. There were dead troopers—he dared not ask how many yet. Turning, he walked away toward the camp.

Dawn broke fully, and day came on. Captain Yarden appeared with the list of casualties. When told how many were dead, Thomas felt as if he had been hit with an ax.

"Twenty-three lost in that fight?" he gasped incredulously.

"That many," Captain Yarden said soberly.

Thomas was stunned. That the Navajos undoubtedly had lost two or three to his one mattered little. And the entire engagement had been as furious and deadly as any he had survived in Virginia.

Dobahuzsin brought in some of the scouts. Red Tommy was still out.

"They took away many dead with them," the old scout reported. "Some horses carried two-three bodies. Muddy Waters he beat!"

"Where are his forces now?"

"All gone," Dobahuzsin declared. "Most off quick. Dead, many dead!"

How many? Who knew?

Red Tommy had more information when he returned. The Navajo warriors with Muddy Waters had fled for the protection of the big east canyon.

"Muddy Waters is on the run, licking his wounds," Thomas said. "I'll take a force and get after him."

"Ah, man!" Yarden spoke up. "Was I not promised the canyons south of the San Juan River, Colonel?"

Thomas stared at him, then grinned. Captain Yarden wanted the job. He would get it.

"Get your men ready," he said.

"I'm ready to ride." Yarden saluted and departed.

In less than half an hour he moved out with half of his Company F, accompanied by his pack train.

Thomas sent a report of the fight to Fort Defiance. At mid-morning he read the burial service over the dead. Noncoms set up markers for each man. When Thomas returned to the guard tent a message came in by heliograph.

HAVE YOU STRUCK A LARGE FORCE OF INDIANS? DO YOU REQUIRE REINFORCEMENTS? IS THERE ANY SPECIAL REASON FOR YOUR LARGE LOSS IN MEN?

He dispatched a one-word reply, "No," and dispatched Greene, two officers from Company F, and Sergeant Herlits with a patrol each to sweep out the defiles and canyons between the mountain and the Colorado River. They would swing back through Navajo Canyon.

BEFORE sundown that day Yarden signaled that he had captured a large number of women and children. Half a dozen men when cornered had surrendered. All were wounded. Muddy Waters was abandoning his people in his wild flight to the east. This meant that if Black Wind decided to come in,

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there was no probability of another big fight or important skirmish in the Western Navajo country.

The next morning from sun-up on the patrols were constantly reporting news, for each had been accompanied by signalmen. No Navajos at all were being found around Navajo Canyon. Black Wind's camp had been abandoned. Tracks all led up the canyon eastward. Captain Yarden was taking more Navajo families, and reported only one brief encounter, one the night before.

The patrols began advancing so fast now that Thomas prepared to break camp. On a sunny, crisp November morning he left only the five worst wounded with the signal station guard, rode down from the mountain and, with his troopers, covered the surrounding territory in a futile search for Navajos. There were none.

He marched to Tseghi, then on into Red Valley where sheep, cattle and horses grazed. Thomas made camp at a water-hole.

Black Wind had come out with all his people, but he had not come near Thomas, though he must have surrendered. Thomas suspected the beating of Muddy Waters must surely have decided him.

Gradually the main column moved on, with Thomas working the adjacent country between the patrols. Captain Yarden sent him his prisoners with their movable property. From the south appeared a few more. Eventually the column with its prisoners took on the semblance of a vast army.

Ten days after his start, Thomas camped beside the red lake at the foot of Black Mountain. Captain Yarden came down with more Navajo families, and Greene and the other patrols drew in.

Thomas let them have two days' rest, then hurled them back through the canyon country in the night. These tactics corraled a few more Indians who, believing the troopers would not return, came in behind them.

From Red Lake, Thomas pulled in the convalescing wounded, the guard and signal corps detachment from Navajo Mountain, and the column got under way again. Patrols worked constantly, riding as far as a hundred miles.

The need for grass to feed the Indian flocks and herds forced Thomas south of the Hopi towns. He dispatched Greene with a pack train to buy corn from the Hopis. Thomas took a scout himself, being gone most of the day.

Approaching the camp in the late afternoon he was startled to observe clouds of dust in the air leading toward the Hopi country. Reconnoitering from a sand hill he stared in disbelief. Bobbed-haired Hopi Indians were driving Navajo sheep and larger stock away without any apparent resistance from the Navajos who were in the camp.

As Thomas watched, he saw a patrol top into sight from below. The Hopis, who undoubtedly had seized the sheep, cattle and horses by force, were all watching to the south. At sight of the troopers, still far from them, they rushed with whoops and swinging ropes at the stock.

Thomas glanced around at the ten men with him, pointed wordlessly at low ground. The Hopis were totally unaware of their presence. And the troopers were not spotted until they began circling northward on the run.

The dust from the moving stock began to drop behind. When he estimated they were well above the Hopis, Thomas swung his patrol southward, which brought them out into sight. But the Hopis did not slacken their urging of the purloined stock toward their towns on the distant mesas.

Giving an order, Thomas led his men at a gallop toward the marauders, turning goat-led sheep, and the larger stock back. The Hopi drivers halted their heaving mounts, giving the troopers dark scowls.

Troopers from camp came up then on the sandy plain that was filled with Navajo stock. There were about forty of the Hopis, few of them armed. They be-

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gan to bunch, facing Thomas, muttering in their own tongue.

PRESENTLY an elderly man, a village chief, kicked his horse out in front.

"Whatsa matter you?" he demanded of Thomas. "These stock belong us."

The try at robbing the Navajos, particularly Black Wind, right in the face of the troopers, had already angered Thomas. The bare-faced lie did not improve his temper, but he managed to control it by taking his time in answering. The troopers from camp were working up close behind the angry Hopis now.

"You're a liar!" Thomas told the chief levelly. "I brought these animals and the prisoners all the way from Navajo Mountain. You men are worse than thieves, trying to steal them from people to whom I have promised protection."

"Huh, Navajos steal from us long ago," the Hopi village chief answered. "We take these from them."

"You take nothing from the people with me," Thomas told him. "If you try it again, you will be shot by the guards. I am issuing such orders."

The barrier of angry-faced men tensed on their ponies. Black eyes roved over the troopers in hatred.

"Whatsa matter you?" The village chief's voice shook. "We help soldiers fight Navajos. Soldiers give us all Navajo stock. How come you no do now?"

"The army has changed its mind about you Hopis, since we have found you deal with renegades, thieves and outlaws. Especially Blas Lucero. If I find any of your men here in the future, I am going to run you in, or kill them. You savvy?"

Dobahuzsin rode in from the north, halting close to Thomas. A mile away Greene approached in sight with his pack train loaded with corn in sacks.

"You do not let us take this property from the thieves, the Navajos?" The Hopi chief sounded as if he couldn't believe it.

Thomas smiled thinly. The Hopis had been robbing Navajos since the war started. They actually believed it was their right. Now only four of the Hopis were riding saddles. The balance forked ponies bareback, which meant they also had raided the Navajo horse herd.

Thomas turned to his troopers. "Dismount all those riding bareback and release their ponies."

The village chief started squalling. Before he got far the grinning troopers rode to the group. One Hopi reached suddenly to grapple with the nearest trooper. He met a fist under the jaw which knocked him to the ground. The trooper unfastened the riata and freed the pony.

That was the only show of resistance as the Hopis were dispossessed of the stolen ponies.

When the stock was started back toward the camp, Thomas told the Hopis to go on to their village, and stay away from his column.

"You hear about this," the village chief snarled in departing. "We go Albuquerque for make complaint. You go guard house, Sergeant!"

The troopers laughed uproariously at his calling Thomas a sergeant. Glaring, the mounted Hopis rode off at a gallop. Those dismounted lined out in a steady, jogging run. Thomas turned the troopers, moving the recovered stock toward the camp.

That dusk in the campfires' light Black Wind came with Kara to see him. The haughty Navajo shook hands, smiling as he talked.

"He says that you are a man who has kept his word," Kara informed Thomas. "You have protected the Navajos from robbery. So he will now keep his word. He will remain at peace, and where the army tells him to stay until a treaty is made."

"He lives for a treaty?" Thomas asked Kara.

She nodded. "That is all that the Navajos wait for," she assured him. "Return to the homeland when there will be no more warfare. This, they believe, will come about when this far-off

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place called Washington remembers them."

"That will happen all right. Please ask him why did not the Navajos defy the Hopis when they took the stock?"

BLACK WIND pondered a moment, finally shrugged.

"They have been permitted to steal from Navajo prisoners before," he said through Kara. "We thought this time it would be the same."

Thomas informed him that in the future he was to fight any attempt to despoil his band. Black Wind now cautiously maneuvered around to the matter of disarmament. His possessions had not been searched, and the warriors with him undoubtedly had weapons concealed in their baggage.

"I have no orders to disarm you," Thomas told him. "While Navajos were disarmed up until the time I came to Fort Defiance, it may be this policy is ended. Let your men keep their weapons. In case of attack I may need your support."

But it was plain that Thomas also was letting Black Wind know that he would be held responsible for any improper use of weapons or men. Black Wind's word would be taken that his men would remain with the column and not desert to the enemies still infesting the No-Man's-Land they were about to enter.

XVI

EAGERLY—for an Indian—Black Wind gave Thomas assurance. He seemed to like being trusted, and glad to reciprocate.

Kara and her aunt still occupied the army tent which was always set up in the Navajo tent with Black Wind's family. Thomas suspected that it was she who finally had reasoned her uncle out of any future hostile stand.

The column went on eastward to Salina Springs. At Steamboat Canyon Captain Yarden and his patrols joined them, having made contact with the column along the border there that was shoving for the valley of the Chinle. This, principally the forces from Ojo del Oso, left only a small garrison guard behind.

"It is under command of Major Trestle," Yarden informed Thomas.

"He had orders from Washington to report at Fort Leavenworth," Thomas said.

"He was on his way to Albuquerque," Yarden answered, "when orders from General Carleton sent him into the field. Trestle was ordered to remain at Ojo del Oso until the end of the campaign."

Captain Yarden had started away when he hesitated and turned back.

"Oh, yes. The major commanding the column said that Trestle is to proceed on east to the states. General Carleton had received orders to wipe out all the Indian resistance in the Southwest, then muster out the volunteers."

When they reached the Chinle valley, a dispatch rider came from Fort Defiance with orders. Thomas was to collect the columns operating in the Navajo country at Chinle, then proceed for Fort Defiance.

Troop operations had been so extensive that renegades had been scared out of the No-Man's-Land area. The campaign had driven in bands of Navajos to Fort Defiance. Twelve hundred were already on the trail for the reservation at Fort Sumner.

This meant the end of the Navajo war. Some bands would hold out, as surely as Indians remained in the West. Thomas knew this, but also knew that no large field force would be required in the future. The important thing that troubled him was that there had been no information on Lucero's whereabouts for so long. And Muddy Waters seemed to have hidden himself cleverly.

Turning the command over to Yarden, he again took to the field personally with patrols. But except for an occasional brief skirmish with die-hard Navajo groups, he saw no serious action. His command reached Chinle on the rim

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of Canyon del Chelly first.

The campaign had already turned into a matter of scouts locating Indians in hiding. When a patrol rode to bring them in they invariably surrendered, seemingly glad to, since most were in a starving condition.

Thomas was in full command of the field forces, and he conferred with the major and his own officers to outline the finish of the campaign. It was expected that they would find more Indians, especially renegades, east of the Chinle Valley where desert, mountain and canyon fastnesses spewed the raiders into western New Mexico.

Thomas discovered, from conversations he overheard between the major's officers and those of Companies C and F, that the campaign was considered an exceptional success, and his men outstanding Indian fighters. He felt that the credit was overdone, yet was glad for the acclaim afforded his men.

Thomas went to bed well pleased. But somewhere toward dawn he awoke, his nerves tingling. Still, when he sat up to start dressing, there appeared nothing unusual going on. Then it came a second time, but so far off the sound barely reached him—the notes of a bugle sounding alarm.

By the time he plunged outside, firing in the distance had commenced, from the north. In the clear air it could be a long distance off.

Greene and Wandrow broke out of the gloom before him. Sergeant Herlits and the bugler came running.

"Must be the incoming column from the north having difficulty, sir!" exclaimed Lieutenant Greene.

"Boots and saddles!" Thomas ordered the bugler, and to his officers: "Let's get going!"

AT THE first blare of the bugle troopers were tumbling out, running for the picket line. The company was mounted, and Thomas was leading off before a messenger could have reached them. Captain Yarden remained behind with Company F as prisoner escort.

Red Tommy and Dobahuzsin rode with the troops but were unable to forge ahead on an advance scout. The troopers' mounts were hardened and too swift.

The bugles had ceased, but the sound of firing still awoke echoes in the predawn. The first yellow light came as they burst through the sand and clay flats. Over the thunder of hoofs Thomas listened until the crash of gunfire was close at hand. Then it ceased abruptly.

The company galloped up into some rolling hills, and an extensive camp lay before them. All seemed confusion, with much excitement and running around. There was, however, something wrong with this column, which had had a company of cavalry along with two of infantry.

There was not a single horse in sight!

Company C thundered up, left-faced and halted in a line before the guidon marking the command post. Officers appeared, and the major in command stepped out and saluted, as Thomas dismounted alone.

The column had halted here the day before, the major said, instead of going on to Chinle because his stock was sore-footed. The surprise attack, where not a single Navajo was supposed to be, had caught them off-guard. The raiders succeeded immediately in getting to their stock, and drove the herd away.

Anger hardened the major's voice as he told of the fight, adding: "And my men swear they saw white men with the Navajos!"

"New Mexican renegades!" Thomas was beginning to suspect Lucero's hand in this attack.

"That is what they say, although I didn't see any of them myself."

"Since your stock is in such bad way," Thomas told him, "the raiders won't be able to get them far. We'll have them back to you within hours!"

Mounting, he trotted to the head of the company. As it swung right about, Dobahuzsin and Red Tommy dashed in.

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The old scout lifted a hand to point. In the fine morning air a cloud of dust showed the course of the fleeing raiders.

Thomas took his company in such swift pursuit that by the time they had covered two miles they were directly south of the dust cloud.

It seemed closer.

"Pretty soon we catch!" Dobahuzsin told him confidently.

Thomas called in Green, ordering him to continue directly after the raiders with half the company and Red Tommy. The second section he led off himself on the run in an attempt to cut off the raiders.

Dobahuzsin instinctively picked the best route.

"They go for water-hole," he said after a time. "No go much farther."

The raiders were destined not to even reach there. So swift were the troopers traveling, that the dust now had dwindled to a smudge, a sure sign that the cavalry stock refused to travel at a run. Thomas feared the Navajos would abandon them, and make a run for it.

But apparently the raiders did not realize they were so closely pursued. This became evident when the troopers swung through low ground, directly at them and saw a large herd of horses, surrounded by Navajos trying to beat them with rope ends into faster speed.

The troopers broke in upon them so abruptly, and so near, the startled raiders could hardly catch their breaths before they were surrounded on three sides. They fell back into the one open route, then Green with his men pounded into view, definitely hemming them in.

There were only about twenty Navajos with the large herd of horses and mules. There were no white renegades. The burly Muddy Waters was not among them either. Desperate, the Navajos had tried to get away with the cavalry stock on which to make a complete getaway. The attempt had failed solely because of the worn-out condition of the animals, which refused to plunge into a thundering run.

THE Navajos did not try to shoot. Thomas ordered his men to take the animals and prisoners back to the north column's camp. Greene deployed his men to the sides and before the moving herd.

Red Tommy was laughing at the helpless Navajos, yelling derisive words at them.

"Tell them," Thomas instructed Dobahuzsin, "to drop their arms and come out on one side of the herd."

Dobahuzsin yelled the order, but for half a mile not a Navajo gave a sign he understood. Eventually, though, arms began to fall. When Thomas believed all were disarmed he signaled to Greene.

The herd was brought to a standstill. The prisoners, gaunt, lean men who had been running around in No-Man's-Land for weeks, were told to stand to one side, and they obeyed. But to all the scouts' questions they turned deaf ears, and kept locked lips. They admitted to no knowledge of Muddy Waters, the white renegades, or others of their band.

Thomas gave Greene further orders. After the lieutenant delivered the stock and the prisoners, he was to scour the Chinle country between the wash of that name and the western escarpment of Defiance Plateau. Thomas himself, with Red Tommy and Dobahuzsin, would set about trying to find the trail of the larger force of raiders, hoping to pick up Lucero. So large a body of raiders could hardly conceal all trace of their passage.

But at dusk, when they had not come upon their trail, Thomas halted to permit a grazing period for the horses, while the troopers ate sparingly of the few dry provisions always carried on their saddles during this campaign. Lucero would know of the operations in No-Man's-Land. He must have headed for some one of the remote jacals, likely taking Muddy Waters with him. Thomas, of course, had no positive knowledge that Lucero had been in the raid, but the officer and his men believed so.

Thomas determined to move that

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night. If Lucero had spies in his rear he would not know of pursuit.

At dawn he halted in country where sparse timber grew. Sleepless, but seemingly tireless, the two scouts went out on their own. They returned after dark, each riding a mustang wearing a Spanish brand, and leading their own ponies, giving their animals a rest.

The scouts remained in the camp. Thomas' men pulled in their belts and rode the night through. When Lieutenant Wandrow and Sergeant Herlits found a water-hole, they stopped.

By now, believing that Lucero probably was making for Jemez Pass, intending to hide in Albuquerque, as he had once before, Thomas decided to swing in that direction for the third night's ride.

When another day came they were just east of a timbered, small chunk of a mountain set like a jewel in a barren land—"Beautiful Mountain," Dobahuzsin told him it was, when he and Red Tommy came in.

"No riders have gone east above us," Red Tommy reported. "Maybe they fled south. Who knows?"

Thomas was discouraged and disappointed, but all he could do now was head for Fort Defiance. Without feed his stock were wearing out. His men were totally out of even crumbs of jerky.

While he debated getting in motion that night, both tired scouts came suddenly to their feet, staring steadily at a slope of Beautiful Mountain.

Standing beside them, Thomas thought they were gazing at a small disfigurement hanging above the trees, a grayish smudge no larger than a man's hand. It was barely seen, then gone.

The scouts stood there silently. Thomas finally picked up a spot that showed faintly in the dark hood of the forested slope. An eerie glow! The reflection from a hidden camp fire. He had seen such a thing before—one of the tricks of peculiar lighting of which he himself had made use when with the Union Cavalry in locating Confederate hiding places in far-off Virginia.

"A fire up there," he whispered.

"Yes," Red Tommy agreed. "A big one. No Navajo would be so careless."

"We go," Dobahuzsin declared, wheeling off for his pony at a dog-trot.

Red Tommy hurried after him, and they took off into the night.

LIEUTENANT WANDROW and Sergeant Herlits approached, curious, and Thomas told them to mount the troopers. They might as well be proceeding slowly as waiting here in misery.

The column headed for the mountain, keeping to the straggled piñon and juniper. When half the distance was covered Thomas halted, but the scouts did not show up. After a lengthy halt the troopers got under way once more. Then Red Tommy plunged his pony up out of a deep arroyo.

"It's Lucero and Muddy Waters," he informed. "Hosteen Dobahuzsin is watching while I bring you in."

Tired men stirred alert. Red Tommy bore more startling news.

"They got close to thirty young men and women," he said. "Prisoners, Navajos from Black Mountain."

"To be sold as slaves!" Thomas gasped.

"Lucero has sold many of my people into bondage!" In Red Tommy's voice for once was deep hatred. "Dobahuzsin says come kill them all!"

In scouting the night camp, Red Tommy and Dobahuzsin had discovered there was no outer guard at all. Lucero with twenty white men, and Muddy Waters with about forty of his warriors, had been hiding in the deep, brush-choked timber. They did not now appear to be apprehensive of pursuit, otherwise they would certainly have maintained constant watch.

"This Lucero is becoming an obsession with me," Thomas said to Wandrow and Herlits. "This time take every precaution possible to prevent his escape!"

At the foot of the mountain Red Tom-

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my found a well-marked trail. Under cover of the timber, Thomas halted while the scout ventured ahead.

Half an hour later, he returned with Dobahuzsin.

"Most asleep," the old scout declared. "We catch good and plenty!"

The scouts gave Thomas a good word picture of the camp and the surrounding terrain. The Navajos were in a small glade where the fire had been. They were bound. The white renegades under Lucero were on the opposite side of the camp. Unfortunately the horses were scattered, hobbled in the grass of the forest.

Dobahuzsin would guide Lieutenant Wandrow in between the camp and the stock, which would be seized by the twenty troopers accompanying them.

The patrol moved on up the mountain side in the dull silence of early morning. Several hundred yards back from the camp Thomas halted, while Dobahuzsin and Wandrow led the detailed troopers away.

"Do you know where Lucero was bedded down?" Thomas asked Red Tommy.

"I saw where he placed his blankets."

"Will you lead me there before we attack?"

"It will be dangerous," cautioned the scout. "Bad if we are seen."

Turning to Herlits, Thomas said:

"Give me and Red Tommy five minutes before moving. I mean to capture or kill Lucero before he is aware of danger. We've finally got a slave charge against him now. But I want him for the murder of the escort with Kara Sudhoff!"

XVII

RED TOMMY dismounted, ground-hitching his pony. Following at his heels Thomas moved from one pine tree to another, skirted brush and finally reached a small glade, the only spot in the forest where the starlight touched the ground.

It would be dangerous fighting through the area, and hard to hold desperately fleeing men there. Thomas could see sleeping men in the grass, the dead ashes of a fire. Even without seeing faces it was easy to tell white men from red, for the white renegades were snoring or restless, while from the Navajos was unbroken silence. The only other sound was the stamp of grazing horses from somewhere beyond.

Red Tommy moved with a slithering motion to the edge of the brush. He peered through, then nodded to Thomas, jubilantly, pointing into the darkness. Thomas squeezed the scout's arm in a signal and stole past.

In a crouch he slipped to the blanket-wrapped form Red Tommy had indicated to be Lucero. In the gloom it was impossible to see the sleeper's face.

Nevertheless he had to take a chance the sleeping man was Lucero, for at any instant the camp would erupt into action. Seizing the sleeper by the throat with both hands, he lifted him up swiftly. In two strides he had stepped over the feet of the only other sleeping man in his way and was in the brush where Red Tommy waited.

The captured man was trying to thresh about, but was held in a fierce grip, wiry fingers on his throat choking off an outcry. Thomas twisted the man's head around to see the face. Bulging eyes stared at him. Red Tommy muttered one short word as keen disappointment cut into Thomas like a knife.

His prisoner was not Lucero!

He had no desire to kill this man, which Red Tommy instinctively knew. The scout smashed a rock to the fellow's jaw, and Thomas laid the unconscious man on the ground.

There was little hope now of sneaking back among the sleepers to try again. There had been little commotion, but still enough to arouse such men as these who slept with one eye open. Two of them were already sitting up, listening, apparently wondering what had awakened them.

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Flat on the ground, Thomas lay beside Red Tommy, his gun out, peering through the brush. But piercing that gloom sufficiently to recognize one man from another was impossible.

"Quien es?" a voice said clearly, and repeated the question in the Navajo tongue.

A sharp *"whu-hu-hu-hu!"* came from one of the Navajos sleeping on the other side of the camp. Instantly all the white renegades sat up. A shot came from one of them. Thomas and Red Tommy leaped to their feet, taking refuge behind pine trees from which they threw bullet after bullet.

Yells and screams answered. And through the pandemonium the sharp notes of a bugle echoed ominously through the timber. A volley crashed toward the camp as troopers rode up.

They did not charge the camp however—only surrounded it and opened fire. For at the first shot Wandrow's men on the west and north sides had come up. Many of the wildly running men seeking to escape the net were dropped in their tracks. The complete surprise overwhelmed the camp in quick order.

In the brush horses were crashing and plunging. Thomas wondered if some of the renegades had got to them. If so, he fervently prayed that Lucero was not one of them.

Abruptly resistance appeared to die out. The troopers held their fire, but kept alert for a trick.

"Soldiers!" a voice screamed from the brush. "Soldiers, we surrender! Soldiers, we give up!"

Behind his pine tree, Thomas called loudly.

"Hold your fire, men, unless they try it again! We'll let those who are left come out."

"We do not weesh to die, sir!" yelled a voice with a heavy Spanish accent.

"Then listen!" Thomas shouted. "You whites, walk with your arms up into the glade where we can see you. Any who don't will be shot pronto!"

SOUNDS in the brush. Then quickly a line of men was outlined in the gloom of the glade—twelve of them altogether. Red Tommy began speaking in Navajo. Old Dobahuzsin's husky tones were raised as both scouts warned the Navajos to enter the glade in like manner.

In the light of dawn now creeping up appeared Indians, hands raised above their war caps. While the surrendering warriors moved in, Thomas was studying the faces of the New Mexican renegades. Not one of them was Lucero.

When about thirty of the Navajos were in, dismounted troopers started working through the brush. Some wounded, and the unconscious man Thomas had seized were brought in. But neither Lucero nor Muddy Waters was among the captured, nor were they among the slain. In the full light, Thomas investigated every inch of the surrounding territory. Bitterness ate at his soul as he realized that the wily Lucero had evaded him once more. That his hungry and tired men had been victorious here, had made an important catch, did not elate him, because of the loss of Lucero.

In the camp the troopers took some food and a few sacks of corn from the small stock of supplies. The Navajo prisoners were released. Then renegade raiders were placed under close guard while the troopers cooked some of the food and fed their horses.

After bringing in the captured horses, Red Tommy and Dobahuzsin made a thorough search of the vicinity for sign of those who had escaped the tight net. Thomas rode out to look further for himself. A mile away in the forest he encountered Dobahuzsin following running horse tracks. Ten men had escaped, but only because, as Dobahuzsin told him, they had been sleeping well away from the main camp. Like the lobo wolves in human form they were, the worst of the bunch had sneaked off by themselves.

Thomas, however, knew he could not

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pursue Lucero, considering the condition of his men and their mounts, and there were not enough captured horses to help. So he called Red Tommy and Dobahuzsin in.

Returning to the glade he again studied the white prisoners. Picking out one who looked more intelligent than the rest, he asked:

"Where were you headed for from here?"

"No savvy," the man replied.

The question repeated to others brought either the same answer or a shrug. Thomas turned around.

"Sergeant!"

"Yes, sir?" Herlits walked over, eyeing the sorry-looking prisoners dubiously.

"We have a charge of slavery against these men—and a charge of murder of men wearing the uniform of the United States. They will naturally be hanged. But remembering that murdered escort, I am wondering why we should bother taking them to Fort Defiance."

"Yes, sir?" Sergeant Herlits asked.

The renegades showed signs of worry at once. Observing them covertly, Thomas scratched his jaw.

"We are overburdened, Sergeant," he decided quietly. "These prisoners may contrive to escape, so we will hold court right on this spot. Select a firing squad!"

"Yes, sir!" Herlits saluted smartly and wheeled away to obey.

Thomas was turning away himself when the renegades erupted abruptly. Facing the prospect of immediate execution they found that they could talk, after all. He gave them a fishy stare.

"It is like this," the man he had first questioned said hurriedly. "We were holing up here until the soldiers got well away to the south. Lucero meant to take the prisoners to Santa Fe and sell them to *rancheros* in the mountains."

Others broke in to add to that information. The story came fast, yet none of them had any idea what Lucero would do next. Thomas could guess he would rush to some secret hiding place.

THE story the prisoners told Thomas was that on upper Black Mountain Lucero had encountered a band of Navajos, and since he had been known to them, he had entered their camp safely. Then he had struck without warning, slaying the older people and coming away with young prisoners who would bring him good money as slaves.

The north column of the campaign in No-Man's-Land had forced him to slow down, skulking around the soldiers almost to the San Juan River in Utah. He had come back southward to hole up on Beautiful Mountain. Then Muddy Waters had come along. The chief had been trailing the column a day and a night. He had wanted to attack it, and Lucero had agreed to help him on learning the soldiers' stock might be easily run off. Such heavy animals would likewise bring good money.

The combined forces had attacked. Only after the retreat had they discovered the jaded stock could not be rushed. Muddy Waters believing there could not be immediate pursuit, had turned the herd over to a few of his men while he went on to Beautiful Mountain with Lucero and the others. They had not known of other troops in the region. Especially that Thomas' flying column was near. The raiders called his company the "Flying Column" now, because of its mobility and swift riding.

"He is afraid of you," a prisoner declared. "He fears that if he remains here long you will get him. This is why he slept in the brush by himself. He will not come back into the Navajo country now."

"You have broken up his business completely," another added.

There were mounts for all now, and some to spare. Thomas prepared to depart. It took time to make the necessary arrangements for transporting prisoners, but by ten o'clock in the morning they were on the trail off the mountain. They made the best time possible on the ride back to the fort, but on the last morning before they rode into the valley

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where Fort Defiance lay, there was not a bite to eat for anybody, nor for the horses.

The lower part of the valley presented a startling picture. Camps of soldiers were everywhere, and spreading eastward onto the Crystal Pass road were teeming hordes of Indians.

All the columns of troops were in. The raid on the far western Navajo country, and a complete sweep of No-Man's Land had been completed. The campaign was at an end, which was just as well for the end of November was in sight, and on the cold nights there was a smell of snow in the air.

Delivering his prisoners, Thomas returned his company to barracks inside the fort. Colonel Sudhoff was jubilant over the success of the campaign. It had proved to be a greater victory than even General Carleton had optimistically believed it would be in the beginning.

For the first time in days Thomas had a chance to shave and clean up. He was resting when an orderly appeared to inform him that the Sudhoffs expected him for the evening meal. After retreat, which he stood, he went to their quarters.

Kara who admitted him, looked as fresh and unconcerned as though she might never had taken such a harried, hard trip as she had. She smiled as she took his hat, and for once began talking immediately. He sat down content to listen to her going on and on about affairs at the fort. Nothing really important.

Later, when the colonel appeared, he drawled to Thomas:

"Well, she's at it I see. It's nice to hear her change her usual subject. I've heard nothing since her return day before yesterday except what all you did."

As Thomas saw Kara flush with embarrassment, he wondered what she really had said to her father. The colonel, hungry and ready to eat, did not pursue the subject.

During the meal Thomas asked about the Trestles, and why they were still in the Southwest.

"An emergency came up," the colonel explained, "and General Carleton threw every force possible into the field. There was trouble with the Utes on the Colorado border. Troops had to be sent to quell them. So General Carleton held Major Trestle over."

"I see."

"The major and his wife will be on their way in a few days," Colonel Sudhoff added. "Now that we have officers and men to spare. A great many of the volunteers are to be released. I hope to be returned to Albuquerque and mustered out myself."

COLONEL SUDHOFF smiled at Thomas' surprised look.

"The wars are all about over," he explained. "Certainly here in the Southwest. I am no longer needed. All the news from the fighting fronts in the east plainly shows the Confederates cannot last much longer."

"The reports are good, then?" In the field Thomas had no news of the Civil War at all.

"All of them. And with that terrible war at an end we can get back to the ways of peace. I expect great things here in the Southwest. Opening up of the country to settlement. The coming of railroads."

On his subject Colonel Sudhoff waxed eloquent. He was a builder, a pioneer who believed fully in the future of New Mexico and Arizona Territories. While he talked a sparkling glow came to Kara's face.

"We'll turn the army back to you regulars," Colonel Sudhoff concluded with a broad grin. "The rest of us will create a livable West for people who are certain to come. I presume you are staying in the army?"

This posed a question Thomas himself had never considered. Now he realized that within a year, at the most, he must decide.

"I'd never given it much thought," he admitted.

"Oh, by the way—" Colonel Sudhoff

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stood up from the table—"that reminds me. You and I have an appointment with Black Wind in my office. There is what amounts to a minor treaty with him. All that is now necessary is your signature, and we'll give him copies to carry along to Fort Sumner. That may help him later on."

"Will the colonel in command there pay any attention to it?" Thomas asked as he arose.

"Oh yes. Black Wind will be given a piece of ground to camp on by himself. General Carleton has issued such instructions. Black Wind will be satisfied."

When they arrived at the O. D.'s office the chief and two of his headmen were waiting. Colonel Sudhoff, who spoke the Navajo language, read from a large piece of paper on which the terms of Black Wind's original demands were inscribed. When he finished, Black Wind spoke one word. The paper suited him.

With much ceremony the chief affixed his mark first, followed by the headmen. Colonel Sudhoff signed both copies also, as did Thomas. The seal of the United States was pressed into the papers which were handed to Black Wind.

He treasured them as the most important of documents, folding them carefully into a shirt pocket. That shirt was blue, patently one of the colonel's from its size. The tail hung over Black Wind's split-legged trousers.

The chief made a speech to Colonel Sudhoff, then another to Thomas.

"He says that you are his friend," the colonel interpreted. "You are one of the few white men whose word he can believe. Some day there will be peace in the land again. He will return with his band to the homeland. Some time you may come there again. Whatever you want, you are invited to visit him and he will take care of everything."

"Tell the chief I thank him for his friendship," Thomas replied. "I hope that all will go well with him in the future."

The three Navajos shook hands all around and left the office.

"Son," said the colonel, catching Thomas by complete surprise, "Kara told me to bring you back for a piece of pie. I guess we're through here."

She had hot mince pie waiting for them when they entered her small kitchen. Also a rare luxury on the frontier, butter from one of the New Mexican villages.

"A supply train came in while we were away," she said to Thomas.

The colonel ate hurriedly, drank one cup of coffee, and took himself off into the next room. He closed the door leaving Thomas and Kara alone.

The moment embarrassed Thomas, for no reason he could readily explain. He glanced at her where she sat at the table, eyes bent downward. She wore a gingham dress which went well with the light tan of her face and throat. But he thought she looked equally beautiful in this dress or in Navajo skirt and blouse.

There didn't seem to be anything to say, so he remained silent. When he stood up to go she went as far as the door with him, where he halted to gaze into her upturned face.

"I'd like to kiss you good night," he said, a husky note in his emotion.

Her expression did not change.

"You may if you like," she said gently. "I'd rather you didn't, though. Not now."

A strange girl, Kara, he thought, as he had so often. He was certain, too, that if he did kiss her, her response would be as wooden as it had before. Not that again, he decided.

"As you wish," he told her, and bowed himself out of the door.

XVIII

FROM daylight on, around Fort Defiance the valley buzzed with activity. Camps were being broken, and equipment packed. Wagon trains were being loaded.

Thomas rode over to say good-by to

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Captain Yarden who was to be with the Ojo del Oso command conducting the Navajos to Fort Sumner. That mass of people, with their animals, headed out of the valley first.

Before noon the infantry set out on the long trail to Albuquerque, then went the signal detachment and the engineers. By sundown the region had been depopulated. Even Thomas' prisoners had left for Albuquerque with the infantry, to be tried in a Federal court—with deep regret that Lucero was not among them.

Where Lucero was concerned, Thomas felt that his work was not yet completed. He had made a special request to General Carleton, with Colonel Sudhoff's approval, to continue his hunt for the man.

The general exodus, except for the regular troops, left a strangely quiet peace hovering Fort Defiance. The garrison settled down to a life of monotony. Out of sheer boredom the scouts went out periodically, only because it gave them something to do. It would be weeks, perhaps months, before any more Indians would be bold enough to give trouble.

As the weather grew colder Herlits, like other volunteers, was impatient over delay in being transferred from Fort Defiance. With the war over, there could be nothing more for them on this distant frontier. Yet when Thomas' request to go on searching for Lucero was granted, it brought a final flare of hope for action.

General Carleton's orders, however, were not too promising. Thomas was to hold himself in readiness for a day when there might be some traces of Lucero west of Albuquerque, when he would get the job of pursuit until capture. But even while Thomas prepared a full platoon for an extended chase, he doubted the use for it.

During the last clear days of November Colonel Sudhoff and Kara often rode in the afternoons, and sometimes Thomas went with them. Occasionally, too, he was invited to the Sudhoff's quarters. Aside from that, he never saw Kara.

The only break in the monotony came when the colonel's request for winter supplies was refused. Then it was learned that the entire command would be pulled out before Christmas. Fort Defiance was to be abandoned.

The news arrived on the first morning a light snow fell. Red Tommy and Dobahuzsin hurried to Thomas.

"They are gathering around Wide Ruins Wash, those people we expected trouble with before," Red Tommy told him.

"We find their tracks everywhere," Dobahuzsin added.

"The chiefs who talked about attacking Fort Defiance when I first came here?" asked Thomas.

"The same—Scar Breast, Manuelito," Red Tommy answered. "Also Chacos Nez is with them. We think maybe-so Muddy Waters as well."

The families of Scar Breast and Manuelito had been taken with others during the roundup. But its leaders had managed to keep dodging the soldiers with a few of their fighting men. They were still mounted and well-armed.

With most of the troops gone from Fort Defiance they were daily getting more bold. The tracks of their spies were constantly being found closer in to the fort. The light snow revealed that some had actually come within hailing distance of the fort.

"Do you think there are enough of them to attack Fort Defiance?" Thomas asked.

"They are asking for help from the west," Red Tommy told him. "We find the trails of messengers sent that way. Pretty soon they collect maybe two hundred. Maybe three. Then maybe they will come."

Thomas knew the roundup had left many Navajos behind. It was utterly impossible to sweep the vast land completely clean of them. Yet he found it hard to believe enough had been left for hostile chiefs to collect a large fighting force.

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COLONEL SUDHOFF, however, did not scoff at the idea. Having known Navajos all his life, besides marrying a half-breed, he knew what they could do.

"Take whatever action you think necessary," he said. "However, if they don't come soon they can have this pile of rock and mud. We'll be going out almost any day, and we'll have orders to destroy what hay and grain and other supplies we can't take with us."

Thomas took some of C Company off to Wide Ruins Wash, scouting the forested plateaus, and patrolling the suspected area. They found evidence that indeed a large body of Navajos were collecting. Their camp sites around the springs and near the natural hay meadows had been abandoned shortly before the troopers' arrival. Their trails led into the Chinle Valley where it was warmer.

Thomas dispatched Greene and Wandrow across Defiance Plateau into the Chinle Valley, but on his return from the frontier patrol Greene declared:

"Shucks, there isn't an Indian in the whole country! If there was any left they've fallen into a hole. Not even old Dobahuzsin was able to cut any fresh sign."

The old scout himself gloomily admitted that he was worried over the vanishing of so many hostiles.

"Bad, very bad," he said pessimistically with a shaking head. "When we don't know where they are, no can watch."

Thomas felt it likely that they were purposely keeping out of Dobahuzsin's way, so he took a little more stock in the possibility of an impending attack on Fort Defiance.

With the uncertainty the days no longer were peaceful ones at the fort. Though the troopers would welcome any chance for action they did not like being kept in the dark. Besides no news that Lucero had been recognized anywhere came through either.

One night Thomas again ate supper with the colonel and Kara and he lingered to help her wash the dishes. So it was ten o'clock when he told them good night and started for his quarters.

A cold moon, slanting its light into the grounds revealed the parapet over the sally port where a guard was walking post on its narrow width. The man was outlined distinctly. Frowning in annoyance, Thomas headed for the lighted open door of the O. D.'s office to have the guards cautioned about exposing themselves. As he turned, the silhouette of the guard seemed to stiffen abruptly. Thomas halted in his tracks as the guard's rifle fell, clattering inside the wall. The two guards at the entrance ran to the parapet, but the guard's body was falling. It struck soddenly, and sprawled face down. Out of the night beyond the fort the hostiles had struck, unseen, unheard. An arrow stuck up out of the guard's back between the shoulders.

Thomas reached the spot as the sally port guards did. As he touched the three-foot shaft it came free of the point buried in the guard's body.

"Close the gates," Thomas ordered the guards. "Quickly!"

He went running with them to the sliding panels that had not been shut since his arrival. But no howling savages poured through the opening. Only the quiet moonlight held sway.

The gates were closed and barred. On the outside it was stripped with sheets of metal. It would be about as difficult to break through as the walls.

In the O. D.'s office Wandrow sat behind the desk when Thomas strode in and spoke to the sergeant of the guard.

"Create no undue noise, and light no lanterns," he said, "but awaken the infantry and man the walls as fast as you can!"

The sergeant dashed from the office. Wandrow snapped to his feet.

"We're under attack," Thomas informed him. "One guard shot to death with an arrow."

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"I'll help get the men out on the walls!" Wandrow ran out and across the plaza for the barracks.

MEN with rifles were beginning to stream out when Thomas reached the plaza. Ladders were placed and they started mounting to the roofs. The scouts appeared with Sergeant Herlits, listened briefly to Thomas and climbed to the walls themselves. They were useless, cooped up inside.

The body of the guard was removed before the colonel approached wearing an overcoat over his night clothes.

"What's going on?" he demanded.

When he heard, Colonel Sudhoff went grim, then he decided that maybe only a few skulkers were around. But Red Tommy's return from the wall ended theorizing.

"They are out there," he reported. "Plenty Navajos. All around the fort. Between now and dawn they will rush us."

Thomas didn't see how they would be able to come over or through the walls.

"They got some idea they can," Red Tommy opined. "That is why they are here."

The infantry were up in force, anxious to get in their licks against the Navajos. So far there had been no chance for them; only constant duty around the fort. Reserves were ready. Herlits was hopeful Thomas would make a sally outside, but Thomas did not propose to get men killed needlessly, by jumping into the middle of an unknown number of hostiles.

For an hour there was little evidence of the siege, for that was what it amounted to. Eventually the Navajos outside got tired of waiting for another chance at a guard and abandoned their usual custom of waiting for pre-dawn to fight.

Firing broke out on the east side, bullets raking along the rim of the projecting wall. Useless that, since the infantrymen were well down behind the protection of the wall lying flat on the mud-covered roofs, watching through convenient holes built into it.

The men manning the west wall were abruptly given the order to fire. Rifles crashed inside the fort, and kept it up. Then suddenly the air was filled with fire arrows. They soared up into the sky, arched and fell inside the fort. The infantrymen had been firing at the Indians lighting them.

The arrows contained balls of wool and shredded bark wrapped about the head of the shaft. This material, soaked in pitch and animal grease made a furiously burning torch. But the mud roofs were safe. Soldiers merely picked up those falling on the roof, tossing them into the plaza where they burned out harmlessly. Below, cavalrymen under Herlits watched the wooden front of the stables to prevent an arrow landing close enough to start a fire.

As fast as the flight of arrows was, Thomas estimated fully a hundred of them. That meant a hundred bowmen. The riflemen on the wall ceased firing when the flaming arrows had been discharged. They no longer had a target.

Then the east wall became awake with crashing rifles. A solid flight of fire arrows curved into the sky from that side. Another full hundred. Thomas whistled through his teeth. Taking into consideration that there were also Navajos covering the end walls of the fort, there must be three hundred hostiles in this attack. Or close enough to that to make the siege dangerous.

Behind the second flight of arrows firing became general all around the walls. Instead of more arrows being lighted, their glow furnishing targets, the hostiles seemed to be closing in to the edge of the open cleared ground around the fort.

The moon was now angling for the horizon, when its light waned shadows would creep out over the open ground. Would an assault come then? Thomas, however, as well as the scouts and Colonel Sudhoff believed the Navajos crafty enough to have figured out some

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scheme they banked on.

Coming off the walls Thomas found the colonel fully dressed, standing before his quarters.

"Come inside for hot coffee," he invited. "I've also given instructions for the cooks to get coffee and food ready for the men."

THOMAS entered the kitchen with the colonel, where Kara poured coffee for them.

"What do you think?" she asked Thomas, anxiety in her voice.

"How are they going to get inside the fort?" He shook his head. "We'll know when the moon goes down."

The coffee took the chill out of Thomas. He thanked Kara, and returned to the wall to await moonset. And with the darkness covering the approaches to the walls the Navajos moved in.

There was no signal given. The ground at the base of the walls suddenly became alive with moving forms under the very eyes of the soldiers. They charged in a run the last few feet. Thomas saw then how they meant to attack. The Navajos carried long notched poles, which were swiftly set against the walls and mounted by climbers who came up hand over hand. With their daring and reckless courage as well as skill, they were making a determined try to take the fort.

With the climbers directly under the wall, the infantrymen were forced to raise up to fire on them. Whenever they did a hail of lead exploded from the darkness beyond, forcing the defenders down. This, too, showed cunning calculation and thought. So well organized were the hostiles that Thomas realized now that only a miracle could keep them out of the fort.

He ran over to the plaza side of the roof, shouting down at Wandrow before the O. D.'s office.

"Call up the reserves! On the double!"

He had no more than got back to the outer wall than Navajo heads appeared above the roof. The first two lean men on the poles carried long-bladed knives between their teeth. The men following were armed with rifles. As the foremost attackers reached the top, the Navajos in the rear were forced to withdraw their protecting cover of lead. Even so the yelling voices, the uproar of struggling of men was so great that orders could scarcely be heard. No attention was paid to them by the fighting men, for the Navajo knife wielders were in at close quarters swinging desperately.

As fast as one Indian was dispatched, another bobbed up. Infantrymen ran over to the wall, recklessly exposing head and shoulders to fire into the very faces of the Navajos climbing the poles.

The reserve arrived then joining the defenders to throw off the roof the knife men who gained it. Blasted directly in the face, the pole climbers were knocked off, hurled aside and thrown back. Infantrymen reached over to topple the notched poles from the wall. They met a heavy rain of gunfire where Navajos had taken a stand trying to cover the retreat of the men who attacked the fort first hand.

Greene, on the west, was hit hardest. Half a dozen Navajos took over a section of roof, holding it for more than five minutes. It was retaken only when the Indians there died to the last man.

Guns finally were silenced when the last running Navajo disappeared in the darkness. But their dead lay all around the fort, in spite of the fact that they had so nearly taken it.

Descending from the roofs after order was restored and the wounded brought down, Thomas conferred with Colonel Sudhoff. He wanted to attack the Navajos from the rear, but the colonel demurred. He said it was a foregone conclusion the leaders of the hostilities hoped for just such a move through the sally port. They could be expected to have set a trap beyond the gates—trenches and rifle pits over which the cavalry could go only at great risk.

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"In the second and third assaults, that are certain to follow," the colonel said, "the besiegers will expend their effectives. Let's wait until after they do."

Red Tommy showed up with the announcement that Dobahuzsin had gone over the wall. He had painted his face and torso and joined the Navajos as they were forced to withdraw. He had told Lieutenant Greene what he intended to do, so he wouldn't be shot.

"He make it," Red Tommy assured Thomas. "He look-see. After a bit he send us signal."

"How?" Thomas wanted to know.

Red Tommy waved an arm at the shrouded, dark escarpment of Defiance plateau.

"From over there. By fire."

XIX

UPON THE wall defenders prepared to throw back another assault. Then, out of the silent night the besiegers came, ghostlike.

The slamming of poles against the wall announced their presence. Gunfire opened immediately when the assault burst with a roar. Soldiers stood up to pour down a rain of lead.

It did not stop them. Poles were so thick along the wall that climbers got in each other's way. Wave after wave came. No sooner was one beaten back than two more took his place. Realizing that the infantry men were being gradually overcome, Thomas sent in the troopers. The roofs creaked protestingly with the weight, yet it had to be done.

The knife-wielders gained a section of roof, but in seconds riflemen were there. Deadly fire broke out directly at the defenders. More Indians poured through the gap. Thomas rushed in himself, using his short gun with telling effect. As soon as a Navajo lost his weapon, he sprang forward, seizing a soldier in a death grapple. That queer breath-taking pressure in a squeeze-down used in native wrestling.

Up over the wall bounced a big Navajo. He stood up straight, in utter contempt of what the soldiers could do to him. Darkly outlined he stood there, while from his lips poured the blood-chilling Navajo war cry. Until that moment every Navajo warrior had been fighting without emitting yells or battle cries. Now the whole air was rent with that fierce war whooping. It was taken up until it lifted to the very skies.

In that cry was triumph, and exultation that they were inside what had been believed to be an impregnable fort. Thomas, firing away through a mass of men suddenly saw the Navajo leader stand clear before him. Instantly he sent two bullets at the big figure. The Navajo staggered, tried to shout something and collapsed with a crash on the roof.

While the terrific fighting was going on, Thomas scrambled to the ground. Running across the plaza he yelled for the bugler.

The man came out, and as Thomas bawled an order to him, the bugle flew to his lips as the call blared forth. Retreat! retreat!

It brought a startled pause to the trained soldiers on each end of the breach the Navajos had made. They couldn't believe it, but they obeyed, springing away from close in-fighting, leaving the space wide open.

Wandrow on the other side of the plaza, realizing instantly that the defenders had been called off for a single purpose, gave a quick order. Nearly a hundred guns were aimed and fired. They kept it up until not a Navajo lived on the roof which was on the same level with Wandrow's men. A few redskins got away despite the rain of death, but most of them did not.

When the fire halted, Greene's men rushed to recover the roof tops, throwing a charge that knocked down the remaining poles against the wall.

"A funny fire on the rim over the valley!" a trooper exclaimed.

Thomas wheeled to look. Apparently it was a pine torch. It waved in the air, was raised and lowered in a weird

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sort of signaling. Thomas caught sight of Red Tommy, crouched, watching it intently.

As the sun came up fast, due to a lack of morning clouds, the fire ball vanished and did not reappear. Red Tommy straightened up.

"Hosteen Dobahuzsin," he said. "He has been looking around. He says stay inside the fort. Trap waiting for riders beyond the gates. There are over five hundred Navajos around the fort."

Thomas was amazed that such a fighting force could be raised in the war-torn wasted homeland of the Navajo. But he did not question Dobahuzsin's estimate, only grimly realizing that the cavalry would have to cut their way through to lift the siege. Such a force might coop them up here for days.

"Colonel," Lieutenant Greene said as came up, "I think the big man you killed is a chief."

Red Tommy went with them to see the heavy fat body that lay on its back. Blood was splattered over the war paint. A blackened face stared uncomprehendingly at the morning sky. Red Tommy recognized that face. Chief Muddy Waters had fought his last battle.

THE dead Indians were dropped over the walls. As day came on the Navajos outside retreated into the distance. Only a few expert marksmen remained in holes in the ground, or behind cover. These occasionally took long range shots at any soldier exposing himself momentarily.

The full light revealed a wide pit-fall dug all the way across the open ground beyond the sally port. On each side of the approach were more trenches and holes. Sharpened poles were slanted from the ground. Riders dashing forth would have met immediate destruction.

Three soldiers had died, and many were wounded, most of them by knife slashes. These painful wounds had to be sewed up.

The infantrymen were relieved and fed. Thomas was summoned to a conference with Colonel Sudhoff and the infantry officers. Obviously the Navajos were going to extend the siege, and in a day or two the fort would be without water. This the hostiles surely knew. The colonel wondered if a sally forth could be done.

"I believe our best chance, sir," Thomas suggested, "would be to cut a hole through the wall, going out in an unexpected place."

The full company of troopers would have to make the try. That would leave the fort undermanned, so the cavalry could not go far from the walls.

"The strategy here appears to be," Colonel Sudhoff said, "to let the Navajos dissipate their peak strength, then strike."

"Yes, sir. Which indicates we hold today and tonight. I will prepare for the field against them tomorrow at sun-up. There are two one-pounders in the store house. I would like to get those up on the roof, one to each main wall."

"Go ahead, and let's hope you can find targets to shoot at."

Thomas sought out Red Tommy. Could they signal in code to Dobahuzsin to give them locations of the Navajos' camps? Red Tommy claimed they could. He was told to try it.

Building a fire on a clay roof, the scout sent a column of smoke into the air. Using a blanket and helped by Herlits he spent five minutes signaling. Then the fire was put out, and Red Tommy scrutinized the vicinity, trying to figure out where the camps were. In some secluded spot the Navajos were cooking and eating, and also had a considerable horse herd.

A little while after the one-pounders had been placed on the roofs and braced, a signal smoke raised far to the north in the timber, at a distance from which Dobahuzsin could send information and be in hiding by the time hostile Navajos came to stop him.

The signals were necessarily brief. Red Tommy's gaze centered on a fringe of pine timber far across a deep arroyo.

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Between the timber and the base of the plateau should be a large camp.

"Where most of the horses are kept," the scout told Thomas, who focused a field-glass on the suspected area.

He could see nothing but when at his orders Greene fired five shots from a one-pounder field piece into the area the results were immediate.

Indians could be seen trying to get riding stock out of the danger zone. Greene and an infantry lieutenant went to work on them. But it was plain the hostiles were scattered.

Dobahuzsin had told Red Tommy of another camp on the other side of the fort, and Wandrow opened on several suspected places. Occasionally they saw running Indians, which indicated at least near hits.

Tired of firing futilely into the distance, the gunners turned their attention to the snipers. They tricked the Indian marksmen into exposing their positions, and promptly delivered to them a one-pounder shell.

The day wore on, and no hostiles withdrew. Night would once more cloak their movements, and again they would come. Every man in the fort was prepared to face this night as one of constant fighting.

NEAR sundown Thomas met Kara before their quarters. She smiled, and stopped.

"What do you think of the Navajos' fighting ability now?" she asked.

"I've never doubted it," he replied somberly. "Yet it does seem incredible they would actually attack this fort."

"They will find it hard to believe in Albuquerque," she said.

He knew how the army had belittled the Navajo as a fighter. The Utes and Apaches had always been the most feared.

"Well" —he grinned— "all I can say is that the chief who is directing them here is doing a bang-up job. We had to stay on the jump to keep them out last night."

The guns and the one-pounders were silent. The soft dusk turned into night, the moon slanting its rays over the fort. Because of the light the besiegers would not make a large scale attack until the moon waned. Once such an assault actually started the one-pounders would be useless, but should a large body be discovered at a distance they could be used to telling effect.

Soon after darkness set in a signal fire showed below the fort to the south. Red Tommy read it, rushed to Thomas at once.

"Something bad about to happen," he reported worriedly.

"What do you mean?"

"No savvy signal. Dobahuzsin don't know how to say what it is. But he signaled 'Watch. Bad coming up.' I no savvy what he means. It is something strong. Magic medicine. Powerful."

Thomas said to the junior officers; "Watch it tonight. We're in for some kind of a surprise."

Dobahuzsin must have discovered some weapon, or some move contemplated which he did not know how to reveal with native signals.

The moon was still shining when animal and bird calls began to be heard around the fort, closer and closer to the walls. The defenders became even more wary, more watchful.

Then clearly they heard:

"Hello, John! Hello, John!"

That was a universal greeting of the eastern Navajo, who had learned it from the army that had conquered the Southwest in 1846.

Again it came:

"Hello, John!"

Thomas placed his face close to a hole in the upper wall to reply:

"Hello, John!"

"We talk to big chief," came from the ground shadows outside. "Big captain of the flying column. You big chief?"

"Go ahead. I'm listening."

"Huh. So. We come get the dead ones?"

It was, Thomas knew, unusual for

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Navajos to touch a human body after it became cold. Suspecting a ruse, he called Red Tommy who spoke to them in their own tongue.

The answer was short. Red Tommy said they really meant to remove the dead for burial. The scout appeared not to doubt this in the least.

"How does it come they will bury them this long after death?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter what they do now," was Red Tommy's reply. "Today they held the death chant."

From his stock of Navajo lore Thomas knew that meant the Navajo hostiles were committed to fighting until they died. Thomas faced this fact grimly. In sorrow too, for the fanatical, desperate assaults would continue to the last man, unless somehow they could be stopped from throwing their lives away.

"Tell them," he said to Red Tommy, "they may remove their dead. If they come openly, and unarmed, no shot will be fired at them."

The Navajos did as instructed, approaching openly through the moonlight to the bodies under the walls. Soldiers saw the blue-painted faces, the curious symbols in vermilion, yellow and blue painted on their bodies. Though in the moonlight one color looked only slightly different than another.

IT TOOK an hour for all the bodies to be carried away. Then the voice that had first spoken to Thomas hailed:

"Hello, John! We fight some more now!"

On his last word rifle fire rained at the walls. The soldiers returned it, aiming at the distant flashes of powder. This seemed to be what the Navajos wanted. Their own slackened off. Thereafter they shot at the fort only to encourage return fire. Thomas passed the word not to waste powder and lead unless a Navajo was actually targeted.

This stalemate continued until the moon hovered just above the horizon. Then suddenly out of the distant shadows charged warriors on ponies. Shots crackled. So fast did the racing horsemen come in around on three sides of the fort that there was no opportunity to drop one-pounder shells amongst them.

The hostiles were not again going to try something that had already failed. They approached in pairs, turning alongside the wall with one rider abandoning his mount. He went over on the other pony, and up swiftly to the shoulders of the seated man, so quickly that they were able to fire almost into the faces of the soldiers.

Then they came upward, swinging bodies from a hold on the wall, and springing. Most of them landed asprawl on the roofs, but managed to struggle to their feet in time to get in a few blows with knife or clubbed rifle.

Some were overpowered and taken prisoner. The wounded were hustled off with them into one of the stalls turned into a prisoner stockade.

There were not as many men in this assault as there had been in those of the previous night. The fury was just as great. For half an hour the hand-to-hand combat raged. It fell away only when a repeated cry from outside gave the signal. Navajos rushed to the wall, leaping over. Loose horses, mounted Navajos and those afoot dodged away on the run.

In clearing away the dead, it was discovered that the Navajo who had led the assault had been Chacos Nez, the scout traitor.

"Looks like we are slowly collecting the entire bunch of wanted renegades," was Thomas' comment.

For an hour there was no action. Then the besiegers returned, creeping over the ground through the darkness. Their approach was discovered only when they were at the base of the walls. The notched poles were replaced. Knife men again led the way upward. The attempt to gain the roofs lasted little more than ten minutes, then the attackers drew off.

Wondering if this could be the beginning of the end, the dissipation of the

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Navajo forces, Thomas descended from the west wall. He had started across the plaza to the other wall when a violent detonation, followed by a sheet of flame, roared into thunder. It came from the base of the east wall.

He broke into a run as he saw the front of the quarters once occupied by the Trestles bulge outward. The wall broke asunder. Even as the explosion died the night was filled with horrible war cries. The Navajos rushed the opening in full force.

This must be the surprise of which Dobahuzsin had warned them! During the last assault Navajos had planted cans of black powder under the wall!

As they poured through the breach, as wide as the front room, Thomas kept firing until his gun was empty. Sergeant Herlits raced up with forty men who threw streams of lead into the room until the Navajos, unable to advance over their piled-up dead, were forced away. The assault turned into a hasty retreat.

Thomas turned to Colonel Sudhoff who was ordering troopers to pile stones into the breach.

"Colonel," he said, "don't you think it's time to go after them?"

"If there are any left after one more try."

"You mean they will actually come again?"

"Suicide attempt."

XX

THOMAS collected Herlits and a dozen other troopers. Selecting a corner stable they began pulling rock and mud from the wall, leaving a thin layer on the outside which could easily be punched out.

Deciding to take only the first platoon, Thomas ordered the troopers to saddle and wait on the plaza. Greene, with the second group, would move only if necessary. But he would be ready.

At three o'clock Thomas began to wonder if the remnant of the besiegers had pulled out and escaped. Red Tommy insisted they were still around. At five, Thomas ordered the second platoon to break out the wall. This same platoon would in turn hold the hole until it could be repaired.

Thomas led his horse through. No shot, no alarm greeted him. The troopers started coming through, leading their horses and mounting quickly on the outside.

As Thomas turned to mount, Red Tommy sprang to his side, pointing to the south. Then Dobahuzsin glided in.

"Only wounded left in the big camp," he said, indicating the west. "They easy to take."

"What about Manuelito and Scar Breast?" Thomas asked.

"Manuelito left this morning with most of his men. He did not join the death chant. He is afraid, so he has run away."

Scar Breast, he said, had collected what able men were left, but they were exhausted. It was doubtful if they could scrape up enough for even a suicide try. The pony herd had been run off by Dobahuzsin. The wounded in the big camp hadn't even bothered to investigate.

So it was Scar Breast who was the strategist! The chief who had sent his warriors to face certain death. Dobahuzsin said that this great defeat had so lowered him in his tribesmen's respect that he could do no less than fight to the last.

"He no hear us if we move slow," Dobahuzsin insisted.

Thomas mounted, passed low-voiced orders and led wide around the trap before the fort to the arroyo in the valley, but this took time. Gray light lay over the valley when they reached the edge of the Navajo camp. Discarded weapons, equipment and personal effects littered the ground. Wounded Navajos stirred only faintly when the troopers surrounded them.

Dobahuzsin made a brief speech. Not one of them replied.

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"No care if they be killed," he reported. "No fight any more."

Thomas mounted a guard, telling Red Tommy to stay with Herlits. As he spoke a rattle of gunfire crashed from the fort. The end of the siege! A bugle blared, and Thomas could see troopers come through the gaping hole, mount and form before Greene.

The platoon swept wide around the south end of the fort, disappearing behind the far wall. They would drive off the small force Scar Breast still commanded. Thomas wanted that chief, though.

His arm raised in a signal. The detail followed at a gallop. He went up through the timber after Dobahuzsin. Across the valley the skirmish became only scattered shots, and ceased within minutes.

Under the pass out of the upper end of the valley, the patrol slowed. Watching through the timber, Thomas waited for sign of hostiles. When not one showed he spread his men wide when the ground became more level.

Dobahuzsin never took his eyes off the opening through the timber. When a series of ridges showed ahead the old scout dropped back. Thomas, in the lead, rode up onto a rise, and reined to a quick halt.

Before him in a small clearing, a band of fifteen Navajos halted in like surprise at the totally unexpected meeting. The war paint of their leader, a wide-shouldered, six-foot Navajo, gleamed in the new sun. Across his chest was an old scar. The chief responsible for all the killing at the fort! The die-hard hostile was not to be cheated of his final defiance!

The Navajos straightened on their ponies, reaching for their weapons, looking to Scar Breast for orders.

FOR an instant his kindling gaze held to Thomas' face. Here was the cavalry officer who had become the most famous white man in the Navajo country. The one fighter who could not be beaten, or beguiled into traps. Scar Breast, visioning an opportunity for undying glory, went into action.

The war cry rose to his lips. He drove in his heels, sending his pony leaping forward. The rifle across his hornless saddle lifted. He rode with no touch of bridle reins, and with his men echoing the chilling shout, they charged the troopers who began pouring from the opening.

Thomas was in motion when Scar Breast fired. But the two leaders were to come to no physical death grip as the chief desired. An expert shot, Thomas did not miss now. Scar Breast's rifle dropped from dying fingers. He sat up straight only an instant, his blackened face glaring before he rolled from his saddle. Thomas plunged over his body as the riderless pony swerved aside.

Then the troopers were mixing it with them, firing, clubbing, trying to beat them down. Dobahuzsin kept yelling at them to surrender.

The skirmish was over almost as quickly as it had started. Only seven hostiles survived, on the ground now, gaping at their fallen comrades.

"How many more left?" Dobahuzsin asked them in Navajo.

"No more," a dazed prisoner replied. "All dead. Or gone."

The battered prisoners were mounted again and sent off toward the fort with two troopers. Not certain there might not be a remnant of the besieging force remaining in the area, Thomas searched the valley.

Several abandoned camps were located, where a few wounded lay on the ground, and on the trail into Crystal Pass the tracks of a running horse. That was all. Thomas took the trail back.

On breaking cover of the timber they saw a rider pounding a jaded horse in at the fort, a trooper, bareheaded and swaying in the saddle. Before the sally port gates now wide open, soldiers were filling the trenches and holes of the pitfalls.

Inside the fort Thomas swung his men in line, dismounted, and turned to-

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ward the O. D.'s office. From the open doorway, Colonel Sudhoff strode to meet him.

"Some new serious trouble!" the colonel announced anxiously. "A messenger has just reached here from a supply train and its guard that have been surrounded!"

The details were meager. The train had been attacked in camp the night before on the Rio Gallo a few miles north of Cebolleta. It was enroute to Albuquerque returning from Ojo del Oso. The train was in desperate trouble. The messenger had got through after midnight to come for aid, and had raced to Fort Defiance because it was closer than Ojo del Oso.

"Indians?" Thomas asked quickly.

"No. All white outlaws. Lucero is leading them, and he hates the army as no living man in the Southwest does!"

"So! Lucero at last!"

"I thought you'd be glad to hear it. One thing more. Major and Mrs. Trestle are in that train, on their way via Albuquerque to Fort Leavenworth."

Thomas stiffened slightly. But the important fact was that Lucero was finally within his reach.

He turned to look at the troopers on the plaza. Sergeant Herlits had come in with his patrol. Lieutenant Greene rode over from the sally port.

Thomas' eyes appraised the troopers who were watching from their saddles. There was Sparks, and Thomas' veterans of the first scrap with Muddy Waters, that hard push through No-Man's-Land all the way to the wilderness of Black Mountain. Trained, hard-hitting, hard-riding troopers.

THOMAS smiled broadly in appreciation of them. There had originally been fifty of them in the first fated patrol. The number had been cut by death in line of duty, but the replacement had been with them on the long march to and from Navajo Mountain.

They watched him expectantly, ready to ride in any new emergency. They had heard the colonel mention Lucero and were ready without waiting to eat, or rest.

Again Thomas smiled, tight-lipped, as he went up into the saddle.

"Hey, Colonel!" Greene called. "What about me?"

"You're my lieutenant, Greene," he said. "Mount, and let's ramble."

Greene whooped as he ran to his mount. Thomas did not give an order. None was necessary. Herlits turned the column, and the veterans rode out of the fort.

They headed for Crystal Pass on the run, slowed only where the terrain became bad, tough men on tough mounts that carried them over into the upland timber, through into the sandhills where most of them had campaigned. Red Tommy and Dobahuzsin had fallen in at the rear of the column.

Thomas, knowing that Lucero would expect help for the train to come from the south, if any did come, slanted into trailless country above the regular route. He meant to cut Lucero off from possible flight to his old stamping grounds around Albuquerque.

The scouts forged to the front expectantly. Thomas shook his head at them. No advance scouting was necessary. The sun climbed into the sky as piñon and juniper gave way to open, rolling sandhills, and sharp, bare peaks of mountain ranges in the distance. Scattered amid the cover were bear grass and branching cactus.

It was noon before they saw the smoke rising in black and gray billows. And that rising smoke told a disheartening story. The fight for the train was over. Lucero had won, was burning the wagons in vengeful spite before fleeing with the army stock. Or had he already gone? Thomas tried to determine that from the amount of smoke. The empty wagons returning to headquarters formed a small train, and he did not believe now that many of them were burning.

Only when a fresh spiral of smoke

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joined the rest was he certain. Lucero was still there!

The patrol was soon swinging into the south, coming up to close with the hated renegades. They verged toward the shallow river as the two scouts moved ahead, seeking a low opening through the sandhills onto the battle ground where the wagons blazed.

Dobahuzsin reappeared first. He waved his arms, bringing them down in a guiding motion to the east. The patrol raced through an opening between two rolling, treeless hills, coming to a place that would give them cover for a while longer.

A wide flat of sand dunes opened before them. The smoke was so near now it appeared to be just over the next hill.

And it was. Red Tommy raced his lathered pony up, grinning exultantly. The meaning of his gestures became apparent long before he reached the column.

Thomas' right arm lifted to signal Greene to take half the patrol on the double around the other end of the hill. Greene's answer was a silent cracking of his wind-burned lips. He gained the objective on the run.

The Rio Gallo was at Thomas' left, as he sped up a rise and burst over it upon the scene of destruction. Brilliant sunlight shone upon a panorama of death. He signaled to charge.

The wagons had been bunched when attacked. Behind them, as a bulwark, the final stand had been made. Now with half of them burned, renegades were all about them, but standing in consternation as troopers rushed them from two directions.

The army stock had been bunched preparatory to Lucero's departure. Five riders were in the act of starting them off. The troopers came upon them so swiftly they had no time to run, let alone defend themselves.

Carbines cracked from the saddles. The five renegades pitched from the backs of their mounts, their death screams rising eerily and dying away.

ON THE far side of the wagons, seven riders suddenly spurted into a dead run from behind the black smoke. The carbines of Lieutenant Greene's men sounded steadily. Killers toppled out of their saddles until not one was left.

The closely packed herd parted Thomas' men as they sped on for the battle ground. Near a bunch of saddled horses eleven men sprang from the very ground, their hands reached full stretch over their heads, as they shouted for mercy. Thomas let Herlits see to their capture.

Their cries almost made Thomas laugh. They had none of the courage of the nomadic Navajos, but they should know their surrender merely postponed their final payment for the deaths of the escort troopers and those here. They would be hanged without a doubt.

Three riders, bent over in saddles, abruptly appeared between the wagons not yet burned, streaking for the Rio Gallo. One of them was the hated Lucero. Forking the fleetest horse there he was rapidly gaining on his two companions.

My meat, Thomas thought, and brought up his gun. His bony dun tore over the ground to within easy range of Lucero. To the right two carbines spoke, but Thomas did not take his gaze from Lucero. He knew without looking that the two men trying to escape with Lucero were dead.

Lucero turned his head, his brown face filled with fury. He couldn't escape retribution, and obviously realized it only then. Suddenly he raised in his saddle, yanking his horse around in a curve by a vicious pull on the reins. Thomas let him make it, bringing his short gun into play. One bullet fired by Lucero whistled away on the wind. Thomas raised his gun, deliberately slow, and let the hammer down twice. Lucero was falling out of the saddle as Thomas raced on past the man's mount and pulled around for a halt.

The dun's sides were heaving. Thomas gave the animal a few minutes' rest, staring at the body of Lucero lying on

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the ground, face up, limbs spread wide.

Thomas paused only briefly before making for the wagons. It was too late to try to save those that were burning. He noted that Greene and Herlits had collected a few more prisoners. Seventeen stood grouped to one side under heavy guard. Ten troopers and wagon drivers who had been tied hand and foot were released. They would have been left on the sand to die in torture unless found by accident.

Graves were dug for the five dead troopers and the body of Major Trestle.

Mary Ann was nowhere to be seen, but beyond the four untouched wagons stood an army ambulance. Thomas rode in between two wagons, stopping beside the ambulance. Lying on the sand was Mary Ann. She wore a gray printed silk dress, and a linen jacket. She lay quietly, eyes closed, as if she might have just gone to sleep.

He dismounted slowly, his throat clutched tight, and walked over watching the chiseled white face. Then beneath the open jacket he saw the hole in her chest, the scorched silk around it. That gun had been close when fired. There was some blood, dyeing her dress dark in the sun.

Apparently she had not been touched after she had fallen. Her beautiful hair was spread out in the sand. Thomas took off his tunic, folded it, and knelt beside her. Gently he slipped it under her head. With fumbling fingers he brushed some of the sand from her curls.

Her chest rose and fell slightly, but the breathing was erratically spaced. The position of the single wound told the sad truth. In fleeting minutes Mary Ann would be no more in this world. He rearranged her jacket, folding the hands onto her body. His touch seemed to arouse her. For her eyes opened once, closed, then came wide again.

"Forest," she whispered painfully, and tried to smile. "Forest, you came, didn't you?"

"Yes, Mary Ann," he said huskily.

"It was Lucero," she said. "The Blas Lucero whom Elias mistakenly turned loose. Elias—was killed early last night. Did—Lucero get away?"

"No, I have taken care of him. Rest easy, Mary Ann."

SHE closed her eyes. He thought she was gone, until he stirred. The slight movement brought her eyes open once more. She looked straight up into his face. Her smile was feeble as she fondly watched him in those final moments.

"I have been selfish and vain," she murmured. "I sought too often to be what you call uselessly important people. A false position in society, my dear. But now that is going to be changed. Everything is going to be all right isn't it, Forest?"

"Yes," he told her, fighting for control. "Everything is going to be all right."

"I knew it would be when you came," she replied, her voice very low. "I'm sorry I tried to wrong you. I have always loved you, and I have been a fool."

She lapsed into brief silence. Thomas took her hand, holding it in his fingers. It was growing cold at the tips.

"That is in the past now, Forest?"

"Yes. Worry about nothing."

"I'm glad." She tried to smile one final time. "We can go on as we were before, Forest?"

"Yes."

That one word gave her comfort. He could see it before the lids drooped over her eyes.

"It is dark," she whispered. "Night has come again. It has been so long since yesterday. And I can hear running water. There is a brook somewhere near."

She did not speak again. There was no brook. Not even the Rio Gallo was close enough for her to hear its murmur. She was dead.

XXI

ONLY for a moment more Thomas remained as he was, then releasing Mary

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Ann's hand he rose to his feet, dry-eyed. He walked away, head bent toward the yellow sand as the past returned to him —Washington, and Mary Ann who had been his sweetheart there. The battle across the Potomac . . . the days in the hospital when she had hovered around . . . The scenes changed rapidly, but he saw clearly that that chapter of his life had been closed when he had gone home to St. Louis. This was just the last chapter in Mary Ann's Great Book of Life. Out here in the Far West the pages had been turned for both of them.

In one of the undamaged wagons he found an army blanket. Greene helped him wrap Mary Ann's body in it, and they carried her over to the common grave. When all was ready, Greene formed a firing squad.

Once more Thomas took the thin Testament from his tunic pocket. His eyes beyond the assembled troopers, fastened on the far horizon of this wild land of beauty, he began to recite in a gentle voice:

> The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
> He maketh me to lie down in green pastures,
> He leadeth me beside the still waters . . .

When the simple service was finished three volleys were fired. Thomas hunted up two rectangular slabs of sandstone he set in the ground for Mary Ann and Major Trestle. Some day he would return to carve their names on the stones.

The prisoners then were started digging a grave for their dead.

Thomas found food in the camp and all of them ate. Afterwards he rubbed the dun with twisted grass, leaving off the saddle for a while.

"What do we do now?" Lieutenant Greene asked. It was only a little after one in the afternoon.

"You take over here, and proceed to Albuquerque with the prisoners and what is left of the wagons." He glanced at the smoldering ashes of the burned wagons. "Report to General Carleton in full. I hope they don't waste too much time on these killers."

"Yes, sir. And you?"

"I shall proceed to Fort Defiance with the scouts."

He wanted to start without delay. Despondency lay heavy upon him. The end was victoriously triumphant, yet laden with sorrow, too. He could remember General Carleton's words on his arrival in Albuquerque as though they had been spoken an hour ago:

"I'm glad to get a man with your battle record. I want you to go to the frontier, start raising the devil, and keep on raising it until you have either killed or captured the Navajos, the renegades and the outlaws of all races infesting that strange land."

Well Thomas had carried out orders. The renegades were gone. The Navajo hostiles were captured, or dead. But the cost was represented by the graves of brave men from the Rio Gallo here to Navajo Mountain. It was the men sleeping in lonely places who paid the price for peace beyond the frontier.

He got into his saddle, but paused to say: "I'd like to have Sergeant Herlits with me. Can you spare him?"

Greene inclined his head, knowing of the strong friendship between Thomas and the bow-legged sergeant. When Greene gestured, Herlits' face broke into a broad grin.

From the crest of the sandhill Thomas looked back. Soon the wind-borne sand would drift over this battle ground again. The desolate graves and the wagon irons alone would remain to mark the place. Graves like these graphically depicted the advance of civilization across the vast continent. A few who slept there would be on history's pages; most would be forgotten in the march of time.

There was no need for the four returning men to hurry, so they took an even pace, resting their tired mounts often. They progressed leisurely from the open rolling country into the forests of juniper and piñon. When they entered Crystal Pass, with the sun just touching the horizon, through the rarefied air

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echoed a distant, dull boom.

"The sunset gun at Fort Defiance," murmured Sergeant Herlits.

All was well. A welcome sound to the trooper on the frontier.

DUSK came on, and they emerged into the valley in the blue of new night. Stars twinkled coldly overhead.

The horses lifted heads alertly, quickening their pace. They were coming in for rest, and grain. Thomas took them directly to the stables. As he walked across the plaza for the lighted O. D.'s office he saw some officers gathered there. Thomas went on wearily to the door of the colonel's office. Colonel Sudhoff, behind his field desk, raised questioning eyes. "We got there too late," Thomas told him.

"Lucero escaped again?"

"No, he is dead." Thomas gave the full details of what had happened.

"The dead cannot be helped," Colonel Sudhoff said then. "It is surprising that any survived Lucero's madness. It has, after all, ended in a smashing victory. Lucero's kind are through preying upon the helpless. He jumped the army once too often."

He eyed the tired Thomas.

"You had better go to see Kara," he said quietly. "She will have hot food. I was there when you came in, so she knows of your return."

Thomas nodded, feeling a thrill.

"Any orders yet?" he asked.

"We are to pack up and abandon the fort at once," Colonel Sudhoff replied. "Two-three days more should see us on the road to Albuquerque."

Saluting, Thomas smiled. About-facing he walked out of the room, but replied to the officers who spoke to him without stopping. Outside he saw Kara standing in her lighted doorway, and quickened his steps. As he entered the kitchen and closed the door Kara took his hat and smiled at him.

"I'll have food in a jiffy," she said.

He sat down at the table. With her swift, sure movements she brought steak, potatoes, biscuits and a steaming cup of coffee to him. "You are tired?" she asked, sitting down opposite him.

"Well, kind of," he admitted. "It's all over anyway, Lucero's gone."

"The woman you loved, too, I've heard," she said softly. "I am sorry." She meant it sincerely, he saw.

"The woman I once loved, perhaps," he said. "But that was over long ago. She chose her way, and I, mine. I am only sorry that she had to finish away out here, had to die so young."

She did not speak while he went on eating. Over coffee he pulled out tobacco, glancing at her for permission to smoke. Kara nodded her head, and he rolled a cigarette. When he had finished his coffee he got up to stand with his back to the warmth of the small cook stove.

Opening his rumpled tunic he reached inside his shirt, brought out the tiny buckskin bag and handed it to her.

"I don't need it any longer," he told her quietly. "That is, not right away. It has served its purpose."

"You don't know what it contains?"

"No. I never opened it. I meant to keep faith with you."

"In a matter which must have seemed small to you, you still kept faith?" She was smiling now, her face lighting up. Happiness was in her eyes, radiated from her whole being.

"Look!" she said. She unfastened the bag, pouring some of the contents into her hand. It appeared light as feather down, and colored a golden yellow.

"*Taddytin*," she said slowly. "Corn pollen, the most sacred of all things to the Navajo. It is worn in a pouch around the neck to ward off evil. I have worn this since I was a little girl. When you rode west into danger, I wanted you to have it."

Thomas was studying her gravely.

"The first time you came to me," he said, "I know why. You told me. But twice more you were near protecting me from what would have been pretty bad situations. I've asked you why you did. I am asking again. Why?"

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"You don't know?" She smiled at him.

"No," he said huskily, "and I'm afraid to try guessing."

"For the same reason I gave you the *taddytin.* To protect you."

HE GAZED at her hard, sudden light dawning. Yet he couldn't believe it. Hadn't he kissed her, and got no more response than from the walls of this room?

"You wouldn't mean that you—"

"Yes," she said simply. "I love you. I have from the beginning."

He didn't doubt her, yet he was astounded, too. He took a half-step and halted. If he kissed her now would there be the same lack of response? He was afraid, and did not touch her.

"Why didn't you let me have some hint of it?" he asked.

"Because I wasn't sure you didn't still love Mary Ann Trestle. That was a decision you alone could make. I wanted you to be very sure of yourself. Now you understand?"

He said, "Yes," huskily and sat down weakly. Here was the beginning of a future he had only visioned, the opening of a new chapter in his life. He wanted Kara more than anything in that life.

He began to talk to her, eagerly, earnestly. He had already decided, he told her, to remain in the army. Her father was right. There was a glorious future for the Far West when the war ended in the East. But in the building of homes and cities and ranches, in the growing new land, the army would still have an important rôle to play, not only in maintaining law and order, but in mapping unknown lands, marking the roads and trails for settlers to follow.

It was a living, breathing picture he painted. Kara stood listening quietly.

"I believe," she said, when he paused.

"My requests in the future will be for duty in the West," he went on. "But life for an army wife will have its tribulations. Frequent changes from post to post. Long travel through the wastelands. It would be hard, but it would be fun, helping create a new great land together." He drew a deep breath and took the plunge. "We could be married when we reach Albuquerque," he said.

"Of course," she said matter-of-factly.

Flushed with happiness, he moved toward her, stopped. Hesitating a moment more, he walked across the floor, picked up his hat, toyed with the brim and dropped it, to consider her in an odd way. To his surprise she was regarding him with amusement, her lips ready to smile. "Haven't you forgotten something?" she asked, her voice low, and with a strange huskiness in it.

"Forgotten something?"

"Somewhere I've heard it is still customary when you ask a girl to marry you to tell her you love her. It's sealed with a kiss."

His hands started toward her slowly. But in a rush she threw her arms around his neck, pulling his head down. She kissed him soundly on the lips; twice, and a third time.

Thomas for a moment was stunned. But he recovered quickly, then he held her close and his lips were on hers that were so warm, soft, and promising. The spirit of her engulfed him, filled him with a sublime contentment.

She did not draw away but remained in his arms, her head lifted while she gazed up at him, her face aglow. This new Kara, this real Kara, he would have time to understand. The warmth flowing through his veins brought the ready smile again. "And to think," he chided himself, "I once thought you cold. Wooden, was the words I used!"

"I wasn't in the mood for light love," she told him earnestly. "Now that you are sure, this is for keeps."

"For keeps," he murmured against her hair.

Out in the plaza the notes of a bugle lifted stridently, only to change soon to the peaceful sounding of taps.

Next Issue's Novel: RIDERS OF THE DAWN by LOUIS L'AMOUR

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The Coward

By H. MATHIEU TRUESDELL

TOMORROW will be thirty years to the day since I burst into the house dripping muddy water and bawling, telling my pop between spurts of crying that Jed Barrach had dunked me in the creek on my way from school.

Staunton was still on the untamed side in those days, though most town-dwellers didn't tote guns openly within the city limits much anymore. Still a lot of them wore what we called a John Wesley Hardin holster—a shoulder rig—beneath their

There's More to Courage Than Readily Meets the Eye!

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armpits, concealed by their coats, and gun duels weren't entirely uncommon, especially over in the section known as the Hollow, the Barrachs' part of town.

My pop looked up from the newspaper he had been reading and I saw his eyes narrow to slits and his lips draw thin and tight. A frown creased his forehead. I whimpered softly, waiting for him to speak, but he didn't say a word. He just carefully folded the newspaper and laid it on the bookcase, then went into the big front room where he and my mom slept. He closed the door behind him.

I stood shivering, the muddy water dripping from my clothing onto the faded rug, waiting for him to return so I could tell him. I could hear him talking with my mom in a tone too low for me to distinguish the words. Then I heard a door slam and I knew he had left the house by the garden door which led directly from their room to the side porch.

I was wondering what my next move should be when my mom came out of the bedroom, calling to me. "You go and change your clothes," she told me.

"Where's pop?" I wanted to know.

"He'll be right back," she assured me; and I noticed that the color was drained from her cheeks and she seemed about to burst into tears. "Go and get into some dry things before you catch cold."

I shuffled off toward the back bedroom. I was suddenly scared.

I hated my pop. I hated him because he was a crawling, yellow coward.

I was eight years old at the time and almost three years I had endured the taunts of the boys at school, reminding me that my pop was a crawling, yellow coward. It was no balm to me to be told by my mom that my pop had been a two-gun, two-fisted young lawman in the days when might was right and smoking Colts ruled the West; that it had been at her insistence that he had laid aside his guns and won his admission to the bar.

MY SCHOOLMATES' unveiled reminders kept alive for me that day my pop had been accosted by the Barrach brothers. He had just prevented them from collecting a gambling debt made by an errant son against his widowed mother's property. Of course, the incident had occurred when I was very young, but constantly seeing it acted out by taunting schoolboys had etched the sordid details in my mind—how my pop had taken the insults of the Barrachs, and even a gloved slap in the face, without any attempt at retaliation.

The town which justly praised him as a youngster had found cause to turn its back on my pop that day. Within my knowledge he'd never defended a client in court except when appointed to be legal counsel for some felon already adjudged guilty. Why he remained in Staunton, living off the meager income from rental properties, I don't know. It was I who suffered for his cowardice; and I hated him!

I put on dry underwear and levis and a clean shirt and came out to get mom to help me with the galluses. Mom was on her knees with her face hidden in the cushions of the big chair near the fireplace —pop's chair. She seemed to be praying and she hadn't heard me enter the room. I climbed onto the sofa and sat very still.

Then I heard pop's boots along the boardwalk fronting our house and the creaking of the gate hinges. Mom jumped erect and fumbled at the knob before swinging the door wide. I could glimpse my pop coming along the pathway, slower than usual and with a stiff-legged limp, but very erect. He wore a grim expression and I could guess that I was due for a tanning, but I didn't care. Then I saw the buscadero belt buckled about my pop's middle with its twin thonged-down holsters carrying two ivory-handled Colt six-guns half hidden by his low-hanging coat.

Mom ran out to him and threw her arms about him and started crying and carrying on. He put one arm around her shoulder and called to me: "Fill up the kettle and put it on the stove, son." Then, in a lower tone, "The doctor'll be right over—I've got a bullet in my hip."

I welcomed the chance to get out of the

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room. I was more scared now than ever. I dropped my galluses and ran toward the kitchen, holding up my levis with one hand. I was still in the kitchen when the doc arrived. Mom had pulled herself together by then and she was helping the doc. I could hear them talking.

My pop said: "I must be getting old, Doc. I didn't have any business letting Til Barrach get a fair shot at me."

Then the doc's voice: "What the devil—excuse me, ma'am. They tell me Jed was in back of you when you braced Til; then you turned and killed him and shot Ollie Earl out from behind the bar and put a slug through Tinhorn Charlie's shoulder before getting around to killing Til. If I heard it straight, then you ain't getting old—you're going crazy. No man in his right mind would've gone into the Red Bull, of all places, to pick a fight with the Barrachs, expecting to walk out with only a slug in the hip."

"Well, they shouldn't have started picking on my son," Pop stated in the tone of a man seeking an excuse for the deed he has done. "They shoved me around for years and I ate their crow for the sake of my wife here—God knows, too many years. They should have let it go at that and let my boy alone."

And that was the last I ever heard at home of how my pop braced the Barrach brothers in their own Red Bull saloon and told them he was ready at last to accept their invitation from years back to go home and get dressed like a man. But I saw it play-acted over and over again in detail at school, and I never grew weary of the sight.

My pop is in his sixties now and he is still active at the bar. He is still lean and tough and can do a hard day's work with many a younger man—and I believe he could put me over his knee and tan my hide right today if he was so minded. I guess that is the subconscious reason why, though each year since as the date approaches I have planned to tell him, I have never managed to work up the courage.

I had wallowed in the creek deliberately that day and Jed Barrach had been nowhere around. That had been All-Fools' Day. . . .

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Do We Have to Die?

Thirty-nine years ago in forbidden Tibet, behind the highest mountains in the world, a young Englishman named Edwin J. Dingle found the answer to this question. A great mystic opened his eyes. A great change came over him. He realized the strange power that knowledge gives.

That Power, he says, can transform the life of anyone. Questions, whatever they are, can be answered. The problems of health, death, poverty and wrong can be solved.

In his own case, he was brought back to splendid health. He acquired wealth, too, as well as world-wide professional recognition. Thirty-nine years ago he was sick as a man could be and live. Once his coffin was bought. Years of almost continuous tropical fevers, broken bones, near blindness, privation and danger had made a human wreck of him, physically and mentally.

He was about to be sent back to England to die, when a strange message came — "They are waiting for you in Tibet." He wants to tell the whole world what he learned there, under the guidance of the greatest mystic he ever encountered during his 21 years in the Far East. He wants everyone to experience the greater health and the Power, which there came to him.

Within ten years, he was able to retire to this country with a fortune. He had been honored by fellowships in the world's leading geographical societies, for his work as a geographer. And today, 39 years later, he is still so athletic, capable of so much work, so young in appearance, it is hard to believe he has lived so long.

As a first step in their progress toward the Power that Knowledge gives, Mr. Dingle wants to send to readers of this paper a 9,000-word treatise. He says the time is here for it to be released to the Western World, and offers to send it, free of cost or obligation, to sincere readers of this notice. For your free copy, address The Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. A-18, Los Angeles 4, Calif. Readers are urged to write promptly as only a limited number of the free books have been printed.

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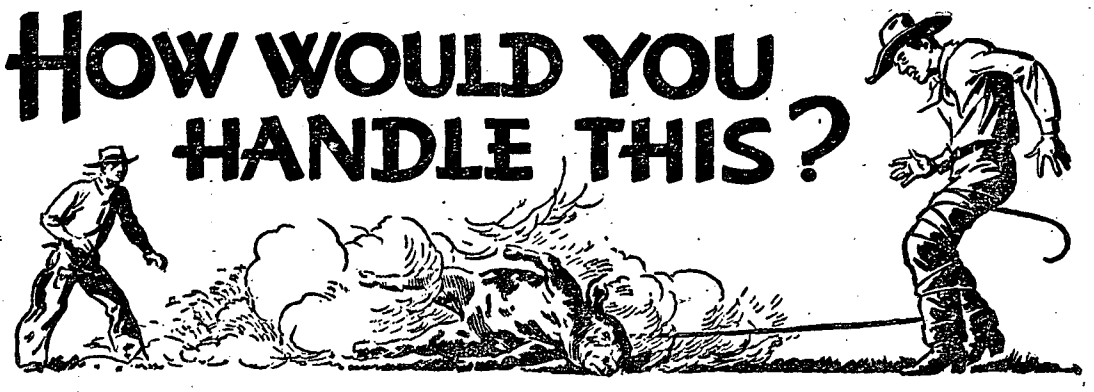
HOW WOULD YOU HANDLE THIS?



IF YOU were range wise, you should be able to come up with answers to these problems—any one of which might face a cowboy in his daily work. Play the game, don't peek at the answer until you've made an effort to solve the problem yourself. Then turn to page 146, read the correct answer and see how close you were!

IT WAS a long cold winter the year Jim Randolph worked for the Frying Pan outfit up in Montana. By the time the worst of the blizzards were over, the cattle were pretty well gaunted down and weak.

Then a chinook began to blow. Overnight a couple of feet of snow disappeared and in spots the bare ground showed through.

"Saddle up and ride, boys," the foreman ordered.

Jim Randolph rode out. The air was warm and the breeze pleasant. He found plenty of cattle lying down. You take a steer that's half starved and weak, but has managed to stay on its feet, toughened to the cold, sort of going along on sheer momentum; it'll keep going that way for quite a spell. But sock it with a soft warm wind and it seems to take all the starch out of the critter. It'll go weak in the knees and lie down.

"And then," as the foreman had explained, "the chinook quits blowing and it gets colder'n a banker's heart again and that steer's legs are too stiff to get him up. Next thing we've got half a ton of frozen beef on the hoof, with no market value at all. So bud, you get on out there and tail up those weaklings."

Some of the cattle staggered to their feet when Jim yipped at them and swung his hat against their rumps. But some were too weak to make it.

So Jim dropped out of the saddle, got hold of the critter's tail and gave it a good start up. Some of the cows would stagger quite a bit and he'd have to support them awhile until they got control of their wobbly legs.

Then he hit an ornery steer. When he started to tail it up, the steer bellowed like a wounded bagpipe and swung its head to try and hook him. An expert at dodging, Jim kept out of reach and finally got the steer on its feet. He tried to sneak off then and get to his horse, but the steer bawled and made a lunge for him. All that accomplished was to pitch Mr. Steer right onto its nose, and there it was down again.

Jim came back and tailed it up once more. And again the steer bellowed and made a swipe for him and those wobbly knees gave way and down it went once more.

Jim cussed it a bit and came back and tried again. And that ungrateful critter tried to hook him and once more went over like a sack of oats.

"This is getting monotonous," Jim complained. "Ain't you too weak to fight?"

A fourth time the cowpuncher got it to its feet and a fourth time the steer lunged out and toppled over. Swearing a blue streak, the cowboy tried a fifth time and the same thing happened. Then he stood back and glared at the animal. And the steer, weak as it was, glared back, still rumbling in its throat, still ready to fight.

"What do I do now?" Jim asked himself.

How would *you* handle this? Can you figure out what Jim did? To check your answer look at page 146.

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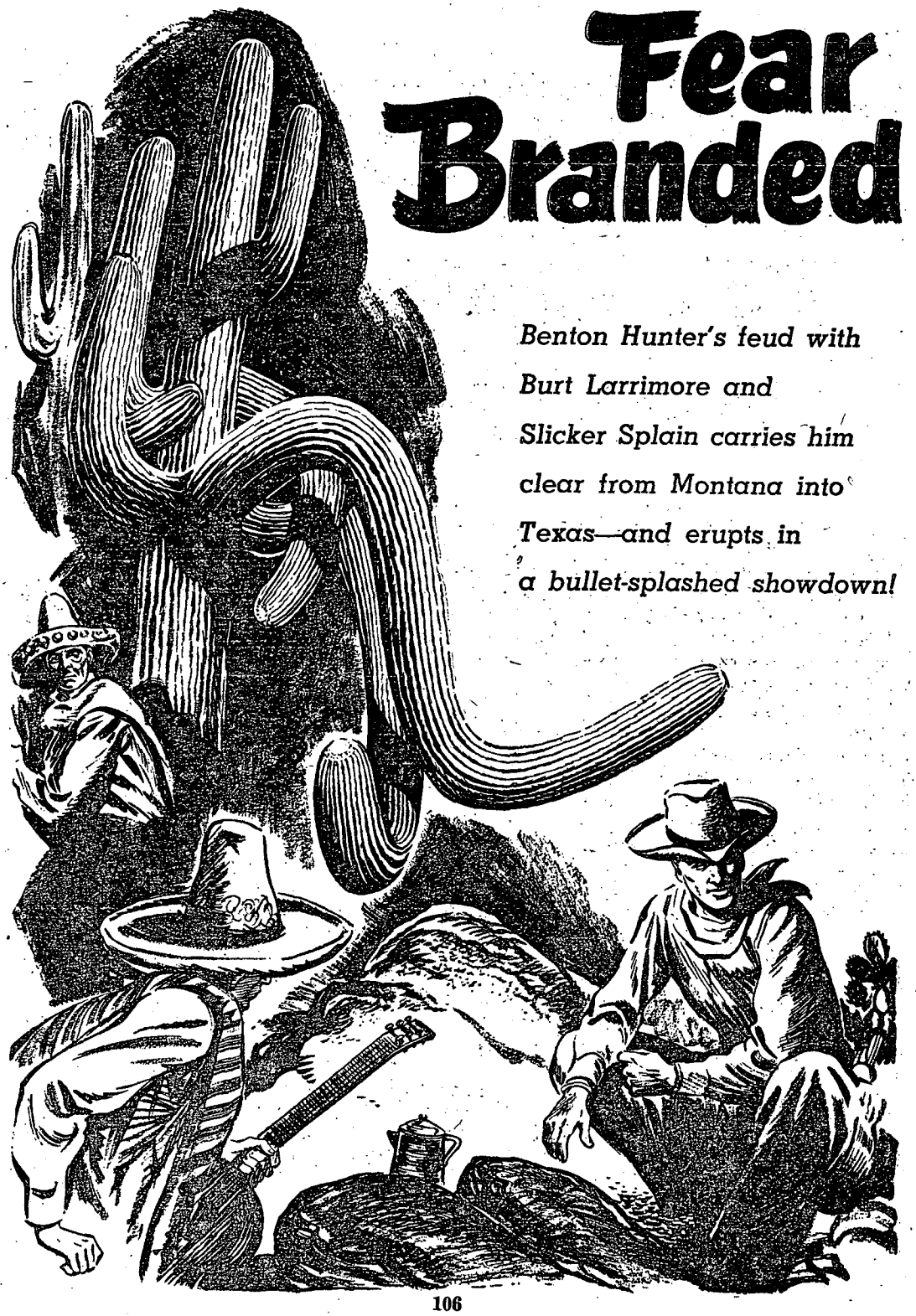
Fear Branded

Benton Hunter's feud with Burt Larrimore and Slicker Splain carries him clear from Montana into Texas—and erupts in a bullet-splashed showdown!



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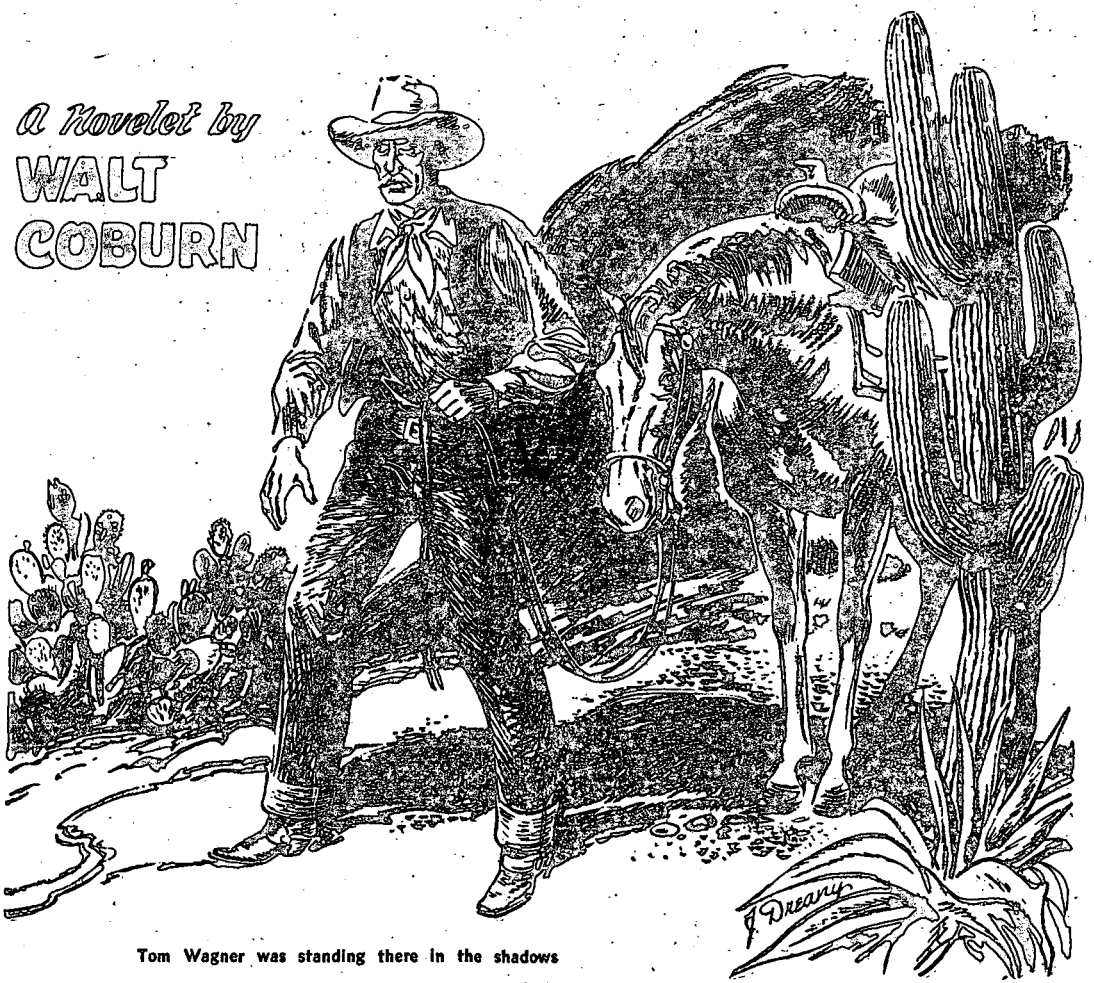
LOOKING back on it now, I've always been afraid of Slicker Splain. I've known him ever since we were kids together up in Fort Benton, Montana, and now that I'm crowdin' thirty, this is the first time I've ever took stock of it, to look at it in just that light. It seemed so damned comical when it occurred to me that I wanted to laugh. Because Slicker Splain is the rankest coward on earth. Then the idea struck me that I could be laughin' at my own wake, and it sobered me right now and I felt kind of sick inside. Sick and empty and cold and shaky like a man must feel when his number's up and he's sittin' in a lone prison cell along Death Row and livin' on borrowed time, tryin' to hold back the clock hands.

I'd run as far as I aimed to go. Plumb from Montana to Texas. And now I was workin' for the Cross Triangle and the roundup was camped on the north bank of the Rio Bravo. All I had to do was cross the river and I'd be in Old Mexico, and for a while I had the notion of 'er. But I'd swum too many rivers already, between the Canadian line and the Mexican border. I'd give 'em a stand-off here. And if Slicker Splain cut my sign again I might do the slimy son some actual harm.

A bronc ridin' job was the best I could get with the Cross Triangle and Tom

a novelet by
WALT COBURN



Tom Wagner was standing there in the shadows

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Wagner, the ramrod, gave me the rough string.

I was easin' my hull up across the withers of a big jugheaded brown that had bin tryin' to shake hands for the past ten minutes, when a voice sounded right behind me in the early dawn.

"That old man of yourn," the slithery whine of the voice with a nasty chuckle hid underneath it, sent the cold chills playin' tag along my backbone, "better watch his step, or he'll be headed back to the Wyoming prison, talkin' to hisself."

I had all I could do, handlin' the green bronc. I'd slipped a blindfold acrost his eyes, doubled the latigo and slid it under his belly to loop the danglin' cinch. I made it and by the time I'd eased the latigo through the cinch ring and pulled 'er up easy, and could take one eye off the bronc to look around, all I could see of the man was his long back walkin' away. He had his hat slanted down acrost his dirty dun colored hair, and was long legged as a sandhill crane, sway backed, skinny necked, with a long pointed chin and a long runny nose that kept up an eternal snifflin', and a pair of little eyes set in too close to his nose like he was sightin' down it with both pale eyes open. I hadn't seen him in a long time and the light was too dim to make sure, but I'd a knowed Slicker Splain on the darkest night in hell's black pit, and recognized his voice, and his way of slippin' up on a man from behind.

I COULD have shot him where his galluses crossed and the cold blooded murder wouldn't have bothered my conscience, whatever. But I'd never pulled a gun on a man in my life.

That's what I should have done and I've regretted it since.

I'm no more superstitious than the next man, but Slicker Splain was bad luck, and he'd become a sort of evil prophet. That's what made me scared of him. It wasn't the man, because I've seen him cringe and whine and I've seen him go down on his knees. It was what Slicker stood for. Things that were unclean and slimy and loathsome.

It all flashed through my mind as I stood there hangin' onto the hackamore rope. It was an early frosty dawn but I felt sweat break out on my face and although I had my old brush jacket buttoned up to the collar, I was shiverin'.

I was goin' over in my mind the first time Slicker Splain ever cut my trail. Back in the school yard at Fort Benton, Montana, when I was about twelve years old.

My mother had moved from our little ranch on the Shonkin into town and had put me in high school. Dad had bought her a brick house for us to live in and I was excited and prideful about it. Feeling like that, it took the curse off it being my first day in school, a country boy set down amongst city kids that didn't talk or savvy my cowboy lingo. They'd left me standing alone in the big bare school yard, while they scattered out in little bunches or in pairs to eat lunch. My mother hadn't put me up any lunch. She'd been out late the night before to a dance and was still asleep in her room with the door closed, when I got my own breakfast and headed for school. I'd had to wash the dishes I'd dirtied because she liked things clean and hadn't got a hired girl yet.

"The kids are sizin' you up, Hunter, on account of the scandal about your mother. She wants a divorce but Judge Green won't give her one because Bob Hunter claims she's the mother of his kid and she's bound to stay married to him as long as she's alive. That's what those girls are talkin' about when they look your way."

The voice had sounded behind me and I had turned around to get a look at the kid who had slipped up without my noticing him. What he said was sure news to me and it sunk in slow as I looked at him. A big jointed skinny pimply faced kid with a long runny nose. His little dishwater eyes loked scared and he was backing off, when a big kid whose dad owned a cow outfit in the Shonkin Sag hollered at me.

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"Hey, Benton, you old son of a gun. I been lookin' for you. Come on over and join the gang. I got enough grub in my lunch box to feed a crew of hayhands. Git away from Slicker Splain before you catch a dose of head-lice."

After school I located Judge Green in his office and he told me what my dad didn't have the heart to tell me, and what my mother had put off telling me. I don't know if it was shame or just selfish carelessness that made her keep it to herself. She liked town life and pretty clothes and dances. I never blamed her for getting lonesome and restless out on the ranch. My dad had a sizeable outfit but it kept him busy makin' 'er pay and he was gone a lot of the time.

The next time I remember Slicker Splain slippin' up behind me with bad news, was four years later. Just before school let out on the ninth of June. I had my saddle oiled and what ranch clothes I would need packed in my warsack and my tarp-covered bed rolled, and I was rearin' to head for the ranch as soon as the graduation exercises were over. I knowed beforehand where the Shonkin Pool Wagon would be camped near Square Butte. I'd get there in time for a couple or four weeks work with the outfit before the windup of the calf roundup.

It was noon recess that I had a geometry exam that afternoon. I was off by myself studyin' for it with my nose in a notebook, when I heard Slicker's voice behind me.

"You better hightail it for home, Benton. They just fetched Bob Hunter to town in the bed wagon. He was drug to death by a horse."

It had to be Slicker Splain who told me the bad news. It was a gutshot. Bob Hunter had always been more than just a father to me. He was my side-pardner. We never talked much about what was eatin' his heart out. Neither of us needed any words for things like that. We took our pleasure out of the simple things that make for fun in the hard lonesome life of a cowhand. In a few days I was quittin' town and the brick house for keeps. I planned on going out to the ranch and stayin' there with my dad. After four years in town, I had more than a bellyful.

LOOKING up, I saw the look on Slicker Splain's pimply face and the excitement in his pale eyes. He was actually enjoying breaking the bad news. I got up and smashed the heavy notebook across his face and saw the blood spurt from his long nose. I left him there, on the ground, slobbering and bawling and whining.

Judge Green and I went to the funeral together. My mother stood there beside the grave. She had hair the color of placer gold and her black dress and veil showed it off. She was the prettiest woman I ever saw and she had a handsome figure. The black veil was not heavy enough to hide the beauty of her face. I'll say this much for my mother. She was no hypocrite. She never shed so much as one crocodile tear at the funeral.

The lid of the pine board coffin was screwed down. We were not allowed to look at what was left of Bob Hunter. For my part, I never wanted to see him dead. I wanted to remember him as I last saw him—a six-footer and well built, with wiry black hair and gray blue eyes that had a reckless light in them. A grin on his face, when the going got tough.

After the funeral Judge Green came along with my mother and me. He had Bob Hunter's last will and testament in his coat pocket. There in the front room where the smell of funeral flowers still lingered, he put on his steel rimmed specs and read it to us.

My father left the brick house in town and a thousand dollars to his widow. Judge Green took off his specs and tugged at his white chin whiskers and looked at my mother and me. Then put his specs back on and read the will.

"I will and bequeath my wife," Judge Green's voice was a low rumble in the

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quiet room, "no more than one thousand dollars because I anticipate she will marry again before the money runs out."

I heard my mother pull in her breath through clenched teeth. Her hands closed into tight fists and her knuckles were bone white. Her short laugh sounded like somebody had smashed a wine glass.

"I leave my ranch, the land and improvements, all the cattle and horses in the Bradded H iron, and the brand to my only son, Benton Hunter, to be held in trust by the Fort Benton Bank, until his twenty-first birthday, and appoint my lifelong friend, Judge John Green, sole trustee and legal guardian of my son until he becomes of legal age."

I left the brick house and Fort Benton. I have been back to Fort Benton, but I never went back to the brick house.

My mother married Burt Larrimore, a gambling man. His uncle, Ike Larrimore had left him a big cow outfit in the Judith Basin, but Burt sold it and opened a saloon and gambling house in Fort Benton. His uncle had given Burt a college education. Later on he regretted it because college had done nothing for his nephew except to change his brand from bar whiskey and a beer chaser to champagne on ice. Burt Larrimore was a tall handsome man with a ruthless smile and a pair of cold light gray eyes. He handled women like he manipulated a deck of cards.

I was on the fall roundup when my mother married him. I didn't know about it until Slicker Splain showed up at the roundup camp. I had just come in from cocktail guard and was pulling the saddle off my horse when Slicker's voice sounded behind me in the late dusk.

"I left a copy of the paper with the cook, Benton, telling about the wedding of your mother to Burt Larrimore. The cook found the bottle I had tied to my saddle slicker. I better drift before he steals my horse."

Slicker rode off into the gathering night and I read the account of the marriage in the newspaper.

I was doing all right with my outfit. I felt better when Burt Larrimore sold his saloon and the brick house, and they moved away. But I didn't know that my mother had my name legally changed to Benton Hunter Larrimore till the Shonkin Pool came to Fort Benton to ship the beef.

"Long time no see you, Benton Hunter Larrimore," Slicker's oily voice sounded somewhere behind me as we lined up at the bar for our first drink, and to scrape the cow manure from the loading pens on the brass rail. When I set down the empty shot glass, Slicker Splain had melted back into the crowd.

JUDGE GREEN said there was nothing I could do about it until I became of age, unless I wanted to haul my mother into court. I let it go. But I didn't forget. I had my birthday, October twenty-third, marked on the almanac and on that day I went to town to see Judge Green. I hadn't taken time to go to the barbershop or change clothes before going to his office.

My mother was sitting there and even in the dim light I saw the gray hair. The song about Silver Threads Among the Gold was popular about that time. I thought of it then. I reckon I must have smiled, because her face sort of reddened and a hardness came into her brown eyes and darkened them almost black.

It was the first time in my life I had ever seen my mother looking shabby. Even on the ranch she always looked like she'd just come out of a band box. There were no rings on her fingers, not even a wedding ring. Her tailored black suit had cost money, but it looked threadbare now, and she'd stained the scuffed places on her oxford pumps with black ink. Lines showed around her eyes and the corners of her mouth were deep bitten. Dark shadows showed under her eyes, and she looked like she needed a square meal.

But she still carried her head high and proud, like a thoroughbred. She got

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to her feet and would have walked around me and out the door, but I stood with my back against it. I never thought I'd ever feel sorry for my mother. But I did. I never said a word. I just put my arm around her shoulders, and the first thing I knew she was sobbing and her head was shoved against my old flannel shirt.

"I swallowed my pride, and threw myself on your mercy, Benton. With Burt in prison, I'm homeless and worse than broke."

And so help me, that was the first I knew about Burt Larrimore going to the pen. He'd gone broke gambling and had thrown in with some outlaw gang. He'd been wounded and captured when they tried to hold up a bank in Wyoming.

I knew now that she had hocked her jewelry, but I didn't know until later that Burt Larrimore had forged my name to checks that tallied up into several thousand dollars. It didn't make much difference by that time. All I knew was my mother was in trouble and I wanted to help her. And I did.

John Green was president of the Fort Benton Bank and right then and there I transferred my money to a joint account. I was free, white and twenty-one on that twenty-third day of October. Looking back on it now I reckon I took pride in that damn fool gesture. It made me feel good inside.

I put my mother on the night train and rode back to the ranch. I never got to the barbershop, and I plumb forgot about having my name changed back.

I rode back in a snowstorm and into the hardest winter Montana had since '86. I didn't get back to Fort Benton till the Chinook wind melted the snow that next spring. When the ground was laid bare, all there was left of the Bradded H cattle were the hides and bones piled across the coulees. I went broke that winter, and I had plenty of company.

I'd bought enough hay to feed the horses through the winter. I figured I had enough money left in the bank to buy a small bunch of cattle and start over. I was young and in good health and I'd managed to save my remuda. I had no notion of reaching for a crying towel.

Judge Green gave me the bad news. For once it wasn't Slicker Splain. He made me sit down, whiskers, long hair, my face black with old frostbite scars, and he poured out a pair of drinks in two water tumblers and made me drink it down and when the whiskey had time to warm my gizzard he told it to me.

My mother had checked out the last dollar I had in the bank. She had gotten Burt Larrimore paroled out of the Wyoming penitentiary and they had quit the country, leaving no forwarding address.

I knew the bank had been hard hit. Judge Green had a lot of his money tied up in cattle ranches. He might have scraped up enough for me to buy a small bunch of cattle if I'd tackled him for a loan. But I didn't. I signed the Bradded H outfit over to him and told him to take care of my horses, and hoped he could sell the outfit for enough to take care of my mother's overdraft at the bank.

I sacked my saddle and rolled my roundup bed, and took the night train West. I borrowed the train fare and eating money from Judge Green. He was the only man who knew I was pulling out. We shook hands, and without my knowing it, he had slipped a wallet into my coat pocket. There was five hundred dollars in it. It was his own wallet, which I sent back to him later with a letter telling him I wouldn't let him or Bob Hunter down.

I NEVER used the name Larrimore my mother hung on me. When I got the job with the Cross Triangle and old Wag asked what name he'd put down in the book, I told him my name was Benton Hunter.

But just now when I heard Slicker's slimy voice behind my back I knew who he meant when he said "my old man."

I'd a been standing there yet if something hadn't spooked the bronc and he

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run back on the hackamore rope. It yanked me around with a jerk and I set back and dug in by my boot heels and by the time he'd drug me a few feet I'd cleared my head.

What bothered me now was that Burt Larrimore was somewhere in this part of the country. And that it had to be Slicker Splain who fetched the bad news.

I thought I had more sense than to be superstitious about it but I couldn't shake it off. Slicker had showed up too many times like that for it to be accidental. And what in hell was he doing down in West Texas, along the Mexican border? Slicker lacked the guts to travel this far from home in the first place.

The bad news he spilled about Burt Larrimore could be a warning or a threat. Most likely it was meant for both, and in just that order. I looked over to where Slicker Splain was talking to Wag. The light was getting better and I saw the Cross Triangle ramrod fish the tally book out of his shirt pocket and write in it with a stub pencil. Slicker walked over to his horse and pulled the saddle off. Wag caught a horse out of the bunch inside the rope corral and led him out for Slicker to put his saddle on.

It struck me as odd that Wag would hire such a sorry looking thing when he claimed he was full handed.

But I couldn't stand around all day wondering, holding the bronc. Nobody had offered to help me. I pulled his head around and eased up on top. When I got my right stirrup, I slid the blindfold off. I could feel the hump under the saddle and knew that I would have to put up a ride. That jughead didn't disappoint me in the least.

II

I KNEW I was on approval at the Cross Triangle. I sat tight the first few jumps. It looked like he was made to order and from there on I put up the prettiest ride I knew how to make. I raked him from the shoulders back. The hair flew but I wasn't leaving a spur trail that drew blood. I was fannin' him with my hat when a barbwire fence I hadn't noticed loomed up right ahead. Then a man on a sorrel horse picked me up, and just in time because my chaps scraped wire.

He was a slim Mexican cowboy about my age, called Angelo. He showed a pair of the whitest teeth I ever saw and his eyes were dark and friendly.

"Olé! Olé!" he said as he hazed me off and we slowed to a long trot and caught up with Wag and the men he was leading on morning circle.

"Benton." I pulled my hat down and reached for the makin's. "Not Olé. I ain't no Swede."

Angelo laughed and said that was what the crowd hollered at the bull fighters when they were pleased with their performance. He spoke better American than I did, with just enough of a Mexican accent to go with his dark skin and black hair.

Angelo was the only man in the outfit that had made me feel like I wasn't packing some contagious disease. His grin and the friendly look in his eyes warmed me inside and melted the cold lump in my tripes. Right then he could have had the shirt off my back.

I didn't expect this Texas cow outfit to call out the brass band. Cowhands have their own way of sizing up any newcomer. It's part of their nature to go slow in making friends.

I looked over the cowhands that followed behind Wag, and Slicker Splain wasn't among 'em. We'd slowed to a trot to let my bronc cool out. The buck was out of him and I dropped the hackamore rope down across the saddle horn and rolled a smoke.

I saw Angelo looking at my white rice cigarette papers that came on a red book. Down along the border they use the brown wheat straw papers that come in a blue book. It's one way of telling a cowhand who has just come from the north by the cigarette papers he uses. I handed the book to Angelo and

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his grin widened. He had his own tobacco.

I noticed a squat, ugly faced old Mexican I'd heard called Cabezon riding alongside old Wag. His head looked too big for the rest of him. Grizzled haired, with a short flat splayed nose, a long upper lip and a hugh mouth and beady eyes. His brown hide was puckered and knife scarred and both ears had been sliced off. Both hands were scarred and the long fingers cramped. He was barrel chested and bow legged. He never talked because his tongue had been cut off. I wondered about him.

I described Slicker Splain to Angelo and asked him if he'd hired out to the Cross Triangle.

"No." Angelo spoke almost in a whisper. "He was not asking for work. Only for a change of horses to ride back to Cuidad Juarez. He is what you call a stool pigeon. He was probably looking for information to take to the police in El Paso. He spends most of his time in the cantinas and lower dives of Juarez.

"Last year he was go-between for a gun-runner named Burt Larrimore, who has a gambling house in Juarez. That long leaky nose of his pokes itself along a trail where there are no tracks to follow.

"Why do you ask?" Angelo's black brows pulled into a scowl above the bridge of his finely chiseled nose.

"I knew him up north in Montana, where I came from. I've known him since we were kids in a town called Fort Benton." I felt Angelo's stare go through me like the sharp point of the knife he carried, hidden somewhere beneath his shabby old leather charro outfit.

"Perhaps you even know this other, this gambling man, by the name of Burt Larrimore? I am not asking to hear the sound of my voice. Perhaps a life far more precious to me than my own, and the safety of Cabezon and myself depend on what I can learn. *Quien sabe?*" Angelo shrugged his slim shoulders.

"I don't like to talk about it, Angelo," I told him. "I know Burt Larrimore, yes. Can you wait till nonight?"

"*Seguro.* But certainly." The hardness was still in his eyes when he smiled thinly. "I can see that you, also, hate the guts of those two evil ones."

"Yes. Is—is there a Señora Larrimore?" I asked him. My voice sounded thin, afraid. But I had to know.

HE GAVE me a quick penetrating glance and then shrugged his shoulders.

"That I cannot say. I have ways of finding out for you. Nobody need know you asked. Only Cabezon and he never talks. Burt Larrimore has many women. Perhaps Cabezon knows if there is a Señora Larrimore. He knows many things he keeps inside him." A strange look came into his eyes, like a thin mist had covered the black depths beneath.

"Cabezon," Angelo spoke softly, "is my partner. That *viejo*, that old one is like a father and mother to me. They tortured him, those *revolutionarios*, for days and weeks, to make him tell where he had hidden me, the last of the de la Guerra men, but they could not make him talk." Angelo crushed the lighted cigarette in the palm of his hand.

"I don't talk about that which Cabezon warned me to keep secret. Now I have talked to a stranger." Angelo wiped the palm of his hand on his scarred leather chaps and there was an angry white red ripped mark on the flesh where his cigarette had burned.

"It will go no further, Angelo."

"That I was certain of before I talked. I would like Cabezon to listen tonight. He is more wise than you and me. Perhaps you could use his advice. Perhaps you might even become one of us. That is for Cabezon and Senor Wag to decide." Angelo rolled his third rice paper cigarette.

He had it half smoked when Wag dropped the pair of us on the inside circle. I was glad of it because the green bronc was commencing to show signs of getting leg weary.

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"Drop what you gather on the holdup grounds. Angelo knows where. Then you might as well ride to camp. I'm givin' you the extra string. Angelo will tell you what horses to ketch," Wag told me.

As we turned off Angelo waited until they were out of sight. His laugh had a happy sound.

"*Por Dios,* Benton, the Señor Wag will keep you on. I am glad. For both of us. Now I have a man without the gray hairs in his whiskers to talk to. About younger things that those others live only in memory. I have never been further north of the border than the headquarters ranch of the Cross Triangle. You can tell me about those girls to the far north in Montana, even across the Canadian border. Have you ever been as far north as into Canada?" asked Angelo.

"Once. I repped once with the Circle Diamond."

"Have you ever seen a rider of the Northwest Mounted Police with the so magnificent red coats? *Mano;* I would look well in one of those scarlet jackets! The black pants that fit tight with the wide yellow stripe along the outer seam! Tell me about them if you have been there, *Mano!*"

I laughed then, for the first time in I don't know how long. And Angelo laughed with me. And we rode along like that. I felt like something inside me had busted and I felt good. By the time we'd dropped the few cattle we'd gathered and gotten to camp, we were pardners. What Angelo called *compadres, compañeros.* And without either of us putting it into words, we knew that it was going to last.

We stopped at the place where the horse wrangler had the remuda spread out and grazing, and we caught fresh mounts there. Angelo told me which horse to rope and pointed the others out that were in my string. They were smaller than the horses I was used to up in Montana. But I knew before I saddled the horse I was well mounted. There wasn't a sorry looking horse in that remuda of three hundred head.

Angelo told me that the Cross Triangle raised their own saddle horses from a hand picked bunch of brood mares and two of the finest quarter horse studs. Most of the mares were Spanish mares of good breeding and the sires of the remuda studs came from the Las Cruces Rancho belonging to the de la Guerras in Mexico. Their brand was the Cross.

With the first warning of the revolution that was to tear Porfirio Diaz from the gold chair of *El Presidente,* before Pancho Villa made his first raid on the vast ranchos, the de la Guerras moved their brood mares and the remuda studs across the line under the cover of night to the Wagner Triangle ranch. The Cross brand was added to the Wagner Triangle and became the Cross Triangle.

Saddle horses and pack mules, all from good Spanish stock, were moved across the border, and a few drives of cattle came across before the Villistas stripped the Las Cruces Rancho like locusts. The last big drive of cattle were caught by the Villistas two days below the border. Three of the Wagners and five of the de la Guerras lost their lives in that fight. Angelo was wounded and taken by Cabezon to safety at the Triangle ranch. Cabezon was captured on his return trip and handed over to the Yaquis. Colonel Kosterlisky and his Rurales found him more dead than alive.

WHEN the tides of revolution in Mexico ebbed and finally ended, the new *Presidente* returned the Las Cruces Rancho to the de la Guerras. But all the de la Guerra men had been killed, save Angelo. The deed to the vast Las Cruces Rancho was in the big steel safe at the Cross Triangle headquarters ranch.

"You behold the last of the de la Guerras, *Compadre* Benton!" Angelo swept off his hat with a sweeping gesture and his reckless grin lighted up his eyes. His sombrero sat on his black head at a cocky fighting angle. He was

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looking at me with reckless eyes.

"You are going into Mexico, Angelo?" I asked him.

"I have lingered too long on the safe side of the Rio Bravo, my friend. I desire to visit the graves of my father and grandsire and the other de la Guerras who shed their last blood on the soil of Las Cruces. Angelo de la Guerra goes on that pilgrimage." He spoke quietly and his eyes were black shadowed.

"You won't go alone?" I asked.

"No. No, *compadre mio,* I shall go in brave company. Cabezon desires to go back for reasons that are unholy. He keeps himself alive for a reason."

I had sense enough to keep still. I could see all the emotion working inside the young Mexican, which he didn't try to conceal. He reined up and I stopped my horse. He was looking right at me and I felt a shiver run like a red hot wire down my spine.

"All this you see for a roundup, it is only to cover up what the Cross Triangle intends to do. One of these nights, we'll camp on the Texas side of the Rio Bravo. Daylight the following morning will find us far below the border. Señor Wag is hand picking what men he will take along. There are saddle carbines and ammunition in the bed wagon." Angelo used one of his own brown papers to roll a quick cigarette. He pulled a match head across his thumb nail and held the flame cupped in his hand as he lit it. Smoke clouded his black eyes.

"If you care to go along, *Compadre* Benton?" His lips thinned back to show very white teeth. But you couldn't call it a smile. It was more of a challenge.

And I took him up on it.

"I'd be proud to go along." I tried to make my voice sound steady.

"*Bueno!*" The smile came and it reached his eyes.

"If you think Tom Wagner would take me along."

"I have the Senor Wag's permission to invite you."

"How about Cabezon?"

"That old *viejo* is a harder nut to crack. That's why he must be on hand to listen tonight, when you tell me about Slicker Splain and Burt Larrimore."

"Is Burt Larrimore tangled up in this?" I asked.

"*Seguro.* In a big way. The revolution is at an end. Gun-running is out. For the past six months he has made money smuggling contraband. Opium and other drugs can be handled in small but extremely valuable packages.

"Larrimore uses Slicker to suit his own sinister purpose, fully aware that the long drip-nose is a police stool-pigeon. I am told that he uses *cantina* girls for the smuggling of small packages of dope. Sometimes they cross the Border at night, a small package hidden, perhaps in their hair that is covered by a cheap black shawl. They are picked up by the immigration authorities on the streets of El Paso. They have no visas, no papers to show, and you can be sure no small package is found on them when they are searched. They are called wetbacks. They are sent back across the line, and if they can find the cantina in their bewilderment they go there. It is the only home they have left. Seldom does one of them go back to the peon hovel where they came from."

I felt sick and empty inside by the time Angelo quit talking. I hated Burt Larrimore's guts. I hated to think the man who married my own mother had sunk that low. But I'd decided long ago what I'd do if our trails crossed, and Larrimore knew it. I had no need to send him word.

WHAT troubled me was what had become of my mother. I never thought I'd see the time when I wished her dead. But right now I hoped she was dead and that she'd been given a decent burial. I was bogged down in thought when Angelo went on talking.

"Slicker Splain was sent here to find out what he could pick up in the way of news. If this was a regular roundup, or if the Senor Wag was stalling until the sign was right for a night crossing. Who

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sent him here is any man's guess. But it would be of no avail to the El Paso police or the Border Patrol to find out if the Cross Triangle outfit was planning a *pasear* across the Rio Bravo. The Señor Wag is good friends with the law and they would not profit by any news Slicker takes back.

"That leaves Burt Larrimore. He is an extremely dangerous hombre. He was raised along the Mexican border. Some years ago there was a big scandal that involved a woman. Larrimore disappeared. Last year he felt it safe to return." Angelo re-lit his cigarette.

"I tell you this, *companero,* because I can read the hatred for the man in your eyes."

"Yes," I told him. "I'd kill that man like I'd kill a mad dog."

"It is time," Angelo told me, "you carried a gun."

When we rode to camp, Angelo unrolled his bed and came out with a cartridge belt and six-shooter in a carved Mexican holster.

"This belonged to my brother Paco. He has no more need of it because he is dead. There's cartridges in the bed wagon to fill the empty loops. Help yourself."

III

WE TALKED there on the river bank, in the dark shadows of the trees and out of the moonlight. Angelo de la Guerra and myself, squatted on our bootheels, smoking and drinking black coffee.

Back in the darker shadow, old Cabezon was there, almost hidden in the deep shadows. Pouring *pulque* into strong black coffee.

Angelo had some *tequila* and he poured it into my tin cup. I must have drunk more than a little. I wasn't used to the potent stuff. Before I knew it I had told even more than I'd figured on spilling, spewing it out like poison.

"This morning," I finished up, "when that damned Slicker's slimy voice sounded behind me, it chilled my guts."

Cabezon moved out of the shadows, with that peculiar bowlegged gait that I knew now came from crippled feet. He squatted beside Angelo and they made rapid sign talk. Angelo had taught the old man the finger talk deaf mutes use. Angelo's low toned voice translated rapidly.

"Cabezon welcomes you and shares what I feel inside. He can tell you but little about your mother. He will try to find out more about her. But the time grows short. When we shall cross the Rio Bravo nobody can tell for certain. Perhaps it will be next week or even tomorrow after dark."

"Is my mother alive?"

"Alive, Cabezon says. He can only hope for her safety. Only one person can divulge the secret of your mother's whereabouts. Perhaps she is bound by an oath of silence. She wears the white garb of a novitiate sister of mercy. She is my sister Dolores.

"Your mother sought safety at the convent where Cabezon took my sister Dolores when she was a young girl. It is difficult sometimes for us to communicate with Dolores but Cabezon found out that even dripbeak Slicker Splain has been unable to find out, that a beautiful woman, with snow white hair begged sanctuary at the convent gate late one night. My sister Dolores gave her admission. Cabezon believes the woman was your mother. That is all he knows about her."

Angelo shed the burden of grief and hate easily. He had drunk a lot of *tequila.* More than I had under my belt. He reached around behind him and found an old battered guitar. I had forgot that he had put it there. He sat there, strumming the guitar, the big hat with its whang leather chin strap shoved back on his head. He sang in a soft voice and the starlight reflected in his eyes. I couldn't understand the words of the song but the tune went inside me and crept under the hide I liked to pride myself on being tough.

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Cabezon made some inarticulate grunting sound and moved back into the deep shadows, taking what was left in the bottle with him. He acted like a man who was afraid of that kind of music because it might needle through the hard crust that had formed over his heart.

I didn't know Tom Wagner was there until he spoke in a low toned voice while Angelo was singing his heart out there on the banks of the river he called the Rio Bravo. How long old Wag had been there I never knew. Perhaps he had been there all along, hidden in the shadows.

"Angelo must think a hell of a lot of you, Benton Hunter," Wag's voice was so low I had to cock my head sideways to hear, "to name you in that song he's making up out of dreams. One hell of a lot, son."

I turned my head and my eyes questioned him. He either forgot that I didn't understand the Mexican language, or else he caught himself just in time. Because all I got out of the Cross Triangle wagon boss was the slow shake of his head, and a slow smile.

Angelo quit singing and laid his guitar aside. He found the book of white papers and rolled a cigarette. In the dim light I didn't see the tears in his eyes till they splashed down to wet the cigarette paper. When the match flared he spoke softly.

"That is a good sign. A lucky omen. I shall enjoy this smoke."

Wag spoke a few words in the Mexican language. It jerked Angelo to his feet before Wag finished talking. He was laughing when he reached down and yanked me up on my cramped legs.

"*Vamanos, Compadre* Benton. I told you it was a good omen. Let's go! But wait!" He yanked off his big sombrero and crossed himself quickly and stood for a long moment with bowed head, then straightened up quickly. His grip was like a steel trap biting my arm as he hauled me off, jabbering fast in the Mexican lingo. Then he remembered and translated it for me as he dragged me along towards where we'd picketed our night horses.

"I'm shaking like a dry gourd rattling the seeds inside. Now we get news of your mother, and I go to meet my sister that I have not seen since old Cabezon tore her sobbing out of my arms. Dolores is waiting for me at the headquarters ranch. It is no more than an hour's ride."

ANGELO was excited and no doubt about it. He would have ridden off on a horse still tied to the end of a picket rope if I hadn't called his attention to it. He was in too much of a rush to untie the knot. He reached out from his saddle and cut the rope and we were off.

I caught sight of Cabezon where he stood alongside the tall white mustached old Wag. I could swear that was a grin that split the old scarred face wide open. Wag made a kind of salute with his hand.

I followed as close behind Angelo's horse as I could. For quite a stretch it was brushy country and if there was any trail through the thorny brush Angelo wasn't taking it. I looked like I'd been hugging a bobcat by the time we hit a clearing and followed a trail across open country. Angelo slowed up only when his horse was blowing and there wasn't a dry hair on his hide. We settled down to a running walk to blow our horses. Before we reached the Cross Triangle home ranch we stopped at a creek and rinsed the *tequila* taste out of our mouths and I washed the dried blood from my brush scratched face. I felt the short stubble of whiskers along my jaw and wished I had shaved that day.

It must have been close to midnight when we rode up to the ranch. There was a light showing behind drawn blinds. Somebody barked a challenge out of the night shadows as we rode up to the big adobe barn.

"*Quien es?* Pull up and hands up!" Angelo called back and two men with

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saddle guns stepped out of the shadows. "We'll take the horses, Angelo. Go on to the house.."

The front door opened as we climbed the last of the three steps leading up onto a porch that went around the old adobe house. A girl stood framed in the doorway with the lamplight behind her. A slim girl dressed in black with a black shawl over her head. Against the black shawl her face looked white as ivory. A pair of dark eyes set under heavy black brows looked at us. Her lips, a natural red, was the only color that relieved the ivory white and dead black.

Angelo flung off his hat and took long swift steps across the wide porch and took his sister Dolores in his arms. I backed down the steps and tried to make a quiet getaway, but Angelo heard the sound of my spurs and waved his arm. Tears were coming from his eyes and he was too choked up to talk.

When I came up he grabbed my hand and put it in the girl's right hand. She was smiling through her tears. I remembered seeing a picture of a madonna once, and that was what Dolores de la Guerra looked like the first time I really saw her. And the pressure of her hand was strong and steady.

Angelo said, "This is my *compadre*, Benton Hunter, and he comes from far up north. Fort Benton, Montana. The head of navigation on the great Missouri river—"

I heard a sharp, choked cry from somewhere inside the house. Like a woman's cry when she is hurt.

I looked past the girl in black and saw my mother standing in the lamplight. She had on a black dress and her hair was white as snow. The shadow hid the lines that grief had knifed there and my mother looked more beautiful than ever I had remembered her.

I walked towards the woman who was my mother. I caught her just in time. She had fainted and when I lifted her she felt light as a feather in my arms. Dolores ran ahead of me and opened a door that led into a bedroom and when I laid her on the bed she looked dead. It was there in the lamp light that I saw the deep hollows under her cheekbones and the dark shadows under her closed eyelids and the lines of bitter grief stamped there. She looked like an old woman with white hair as her head lay on the pillow.

I stood looking down at her until I felt the girl's hand on my arm. My eyes felt itchy like there was hot sand blinding them. I was too choked to say anything, and then Angelo led me out of the room and into the big living room where an open fire burned. There was a whiskey decanter and glasses on the table and Angelo poured us drinks. His glass touched mine and we drank. We both needed a drink then.

I HAD gotten a pretty fair grip on myself by the time Dolores came in a little while later. She crossed over to where I stood staring into the open fire trying to figure out something that was too big for me to understand. Without a word, the girl took hold of my hand and we stood there like that as though we were expecting the solution to all the questions to be answered in the flames that threw shadows across the room.

"Your mother has only a short time to live, Benton. She wants a few minutes to recover from the shock of seeing you. I have cared for her during the past months and I know the suffering she has gone through. I have been with her during the blackest hours of her life when she had nothing to live for. She prayed for one thing only—that she might see her son before she died. It was like an answer to her one prayer when you came.

"She was prepared for everything, anything, she said just now, all but the forgiveness that showed in your eyes when you took her in your arms. She was unready for that. She had no guard against it.

"She has told me everything there

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was to tell. I have known you for a long time, Benton. A life time. Since you were a baby." I felt her hand tighten in mine.

"Since I was a small girl I have lived a cloistered life. Cabezon was the only man I ever knew. I built my dreams around a man I had never seen. When Angelo spoke your name, calling you his *compadre*, it seemed a strange miracle. You barely escaped having two swooning women on your hands." Her soft laugh sounded barely louder than a whisper.

I knew then that I loved Dolores de la Guerra. I lacked the courage to tell her then, but she must have read it in my eyes. She did a strange thing. But to me, right then, it seemed the most natural thing to do. She lifted her head and her face was close to mine. I lost myself in her dark eyes when she kissed me and I held her, her arms around me. We had both forgotten that Angelo was standing back in the shadow. He must have stood very still because nary a faint tinkle of the big roweled Mexican spurs he wore betrayed his presence.

But a sneeze is a sneeze and when it tickles and itches the membrane of a man's nostrils, Angelo said later, then it takes a miracle of God to stop it, and he said he was no worker of miracles. It sounded like a gun powder blast in the hushed silence. And it had the same effect. When we whirled around, it was my mother we saw framed in the doorway. It was the first time that I had heard her laugh.

Dolores and I stood there, holding hands, red-faced with confusion. Like a pair of kids caught playing a kissing game. Then we were all laughing. It had busted the tension and there was something almost hysterical in the mirth that was like a skift of ice over dangerous black water.

Angelo brought a bottle of sherry wine and filled two glasses and he poured whiskey into our shot glasses, and we drank a silent toast. There, for a short hour, we were very gay.

Angelo did something of an heroic job that night. He built up the story of that explosive sneeze into a classic tale and acted it out. Crouched back in a far shadow, each hand gripping a spur rowel to keep them silent, climaxing the anecdote with a second even more boisterous sneeze.

"Gesundheit!" My mother laughed.

ANGELO teased his sister about her cropped hair under the *rebozo* and suggested all manner of tonics. Without their noticing it, he re-filled the wine glasses. He passed behind his sister's chair and took an older brother's advantage to slip back the shawl as he tipped her head back to kiss her. Dolores had grown a boy's crop of thick curly hair, and to me it looked beautiful and I had the courage to say so.

Angelo spoke to his sister in the Mexican tongue as he pulled her to her feet and headed for a bedroom door. In no time she was back, dressed in a Chino Pablano fiesta dress and castanets in her hands. Bare legged, bare-footed. Angelo found the guitar Tom Wagner had given him last Christmas and he played and sang, and Dolores remembered the dance she had learned as a kid.

It all turned into a gay little fiesta.

There was the look of death in my mother's eyes but we avoided it. Until she said she had spent the happiest hour of her whole life. I lifted her up from the big arm chair. I didn't know she had died in my arms when she kissed me, until I laid her down on the bed. Her eyes were closed and there was a smile on her lips, death erasing the lines of suffering.

"No person," Dolores said softly, "ever died a more beautiful death." She lit candles and we sank to our knees, and Dolores prayed aloud as we knelt beside her at the death bed.

Two of the Cross Triangle ranch hands dug a grave and made a pine-board coffin, and we buried my mother there.

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IV

DOLORES told us that my mother had told her the plans made by Burt Larrimore, who was already on his way to the Las Cruces hacienda. For a long time now he'd been planning how to get hold of the Las Cruces grant. He'd sent for his tough renegades and they had been trickling into Cuidad Juarez. She mentioned several Mexican names that changed Angelo's eyes to black flint.

For each of those names, he had one of his own. Gomez, the butcher. Serrano, the buzzard. Jiminez, the jackal. Trujillo, the *tigre*. All of them had been politicos, grafters, thieves, cut-throats and worse. All should have been 'dobe walled and shot down by drunken marksmen for a firing squad. Trouble makers, they changed sides with every revolution. Even now they were banded together plotting another rebellion.

The border town of Cuidad Juarez was the hotbed of every revolution in Mexico. If the rebellion failed, there was always the bridge across the Rio Bravo to El Paso and hidden safety. Burt Larrimore's *cantina* had been their meeting place, their rendezvous, for months. Larrimore was left with the last batch of smuggled guns and ammunition. Now he had use for them.

Burt Larrimore knew that Angelo was the only de la Guerro left to inherit the vast Las Cruces Grant. He was planning on killing Angelo and taking the rancho on a Mexican Government ninety-nine-year lease. The official papers were already drawn up and the price agreed upon.

"Cabezon was right." Angelo's voice had a brittle sound. "It could be a trap. Beware, he always tells me, of the *abrazo* of an over-night *politico*. Every man who salutes with the *abrazo* is not your brother." Angelo's eyes were still flint as he looked at me.

"Believe me, *compadre* Benton, I am not the one to shove you into this marriage with my sister with undue haste. But if I have the misfortune to be killed, there is no man to take my place to claim the Las Cruces. I will put it down in writing that I have willed it to my brother-in-law by marriage to my only sister. I have sent a man for the *Padre*. When he arrives, I will explain the necessity of discarding all the Mother Church rigmarole about announcing the intention of marriage. It would take weeks, where we have but hours. I beg of you, *compadre mio*, not to mistake my intentions." A smile came to his sweat beaded face. "Behold! My two hands hold no shotgun!"

I told him I thought he was honoring me. He had sung the song he had made up last evening on the bank of the Rio Bravo, sung it for us there in his room and translated it and his words kept the red blush in the cheeks of his sister.

We could take lessons from the Mexican pattern in a lot of things that makes us look like a nation of gringos.

Dolores understood what Angelo was saying. She had come up alongside me and the strong feel of her hand in mine made any foolish prideful notions I might have seem silly. Angelo was talking about life and death. And the earth lay fresh on the grave of my mother. I owed a debt to the de la Guerra name that I could never repay. Angelo made me feel like I was paying the first installment on it now.

I had time to shave and take a bath and put on the clean clothes Angelo dug up for me, before the *Padre* got there just before daybreak.

I wasn't too surprised to see Cabezon show up. That *viejo* had ridden close herd on Angelo too long to ever let him out of sight for more than an hour.

Dolores and I were married outside, beside the grave of my mother as she wished it. Angelo handed me his mother's plain gold wedding ring and when I slid it down her finger, the sunrise shone down on the happiest man on earth.

Cabezon shook my hand. He was voiceless but what he felt was written

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in his eyes. Wicked black eyes that had lost their cruelty. His fingers slowly spelled out the word *compadre.*

We ate a sunrise breakfast. The Mexican woman who did the cooking must have worked all night in her kitchen.

Angelo and Cabezon and I rode along together. The Cross Triangle had moved camp right after we left. We caught up with the outfit in the dark that late evening, forty miles below the border. The worried look went out of Wag's puckered eyes when he recognized us and got a count on us by the light he used for his cigarette. Wag had left the mess wagon and bed wagon behind. It was a pack outfit now. No tell-tale blaze of fire showed in the dark. Every horse bell had been unstrapped and left with the wagons. A storm had come up from out of old Mexico and spread a black blanket under the stars and the night was black. The sheet lightning that seared the southern skyline was too far off to shed any light. Only such a man as Cabezon could have located the outfit in the pitch dark that closed in on us.

WE ATE cold jerky and *frijole* beans and washed it down with creek water. While Angelo broke the news, Wag's hand gripped mine and while he was a man of few words he let me know how he felt about the marriage.

"You're a lucky Montana *buscadero,*" a Cross Triangle cowhand broke the silence. And I knew that I had been taken into the outfit.

"They're layin' for us, Senor Wag," Angelo said quietly, "At the Hacienda Las Cruces." He named off every man by his ugly title. "Larrimore, the lobo wolf, Slicker Splain, the coyote," he finished.

Wag said, "The Mexican who brought me the latest news from Juarez says Slicker Splain has gone plumb loco on *mescal* and *marijuana.* He keeps hollering your name, Benton, and says he's goin' to kill you. He must have it in for you bad."

I said I didn't know the reason why. It was time to go and we'd been delayin' the outfit. I had time to think it out as we rode through the dark. As the thunder rolled up out of Old Mexico and across the stretch of desert, over us like a black tide.

I went back in my mind, across the years to when I'd first met Slicker Splain, when he was a pimply faced kid with a runny nose who hung around Burt Larrimore's saloon and gambling house, playing hookey from school to run errands for the saloon, carrying lard pails filled with beer, "rushing the growler" it was called. He was an expert at rolling drunks Burt Larrimore's bouncer kicked out the back door into the dark alley. Slicker was despised by the other kids in school and he was bound to resent their cruel, barbed jibes.

I was about the only kid who never voiced my contempt. I made a point of avoiding him whenever I could, because he gave me the creeps. Slicker Splain had no home. He slept in one of the back rooms of Larrimore's saloon on a pile of filthy blankets and soogans swiped from some sheep-herder's bedroll. He ate his meals at the Chinese's and washed dishes to pay for his meals. He had no folks. He had drifted into town about the same time Burt Larrimore showed up and opened his saloon and gambling house.

Once or twice I made the mistake of feeling sorry for the kid. I must have been clumsy about it, because he backed away from my friendly overtures, showing his yellow teeth and his nose dripping all the more, hatred in his pale eyes.

Perhaps that was why he hated me and singled me out to take out his spite in the only way he knew. He knew how to hurt me but so far as I ever knew I was the only one he ever struck back at, in that sneaking cunning way he used to make himself the bearer of evil news, or to give voice to some ugly prophecy.

I always had wondered why he picked

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on me, and I was wondering now, trying to puzzle it out. Because somehow it seemed important, and the answer kept backing away in the night like some evil ghost. I could have sworn that somewhere, just out of reach, was the answer to it. I knew it was there and I couldn't find the name for it. Slicker Splain knew the reason. He could have told me the first time he slipped up behind me in the school yard. But he kept it hidden, like a kid hides something closed in his fist that he holds behind his back. I could have whipped it out of him but I couldn't stand to touch him.

I wanted to know the reason why he hated my guts. I felt that I had to know it before we reached the hacienda and the ruckus started. I worked myself into a cold sweat about it.

"Blasted if I'll give up!" The sound of my own voice busting out like that in the night, gave me a start.

"How, now?" said Angelo riding alongside me. "What's troubling you, *compadre?*"

"The reason why Slicker Splain hates me."

"Perhaps I have the answer for that," Angelo explained. "Slicker went loco because of the *mescal* he poured into his weak body and the *marijuana* smoke that drugged his brain. Slicker Splain killed a man in Larrimore's *cantina* at Juarez because he called him Burt Larrimore's bastard son."

I let out a kind of grunt, like I'd been kicked in the belly. Angelo had given me the key. There was the answer to everything. I had mistaken the look in the pimply kid's eyes. It wasn't hate. It was triumph, a sort of victory. Hatred, mixed with gloating. Slicker Splain had found somebody he could kick with his own cowardly weapons and he took sadistic delight in it. For the first time in his life Slicker had found somebody he could punish.

IT WAS Burt Larrimore who was doing the actual harm, and his was a reflected glory from the blackleg actions of a father who was ashamed to claim his craven weakling illegitimate son.

It must have taken all the will power Slicker could summon up to keep from telling me that it was his own flesh and blood father who was taking Bob Hunter's wife from him, robbing me of my mother. If he could have thrown that, like so much filth in my face, his victory would have been complete. But Slicker Splain had strong reason for keeping his mouth shut. Because there at the beginning, it would have gummed the gambler's cards. Larrimore would have killed him for that. It was fear that kept his mouth shut.

Now that he was free to talk, Slicker must be rearing to spill his news. There was no more need for secrecy. The shame that tainted his birthright made no difference to Slicker Splain. I looked for him to shout aloud about his birth for all the world to hear. He had saved that final shot for the last and meant it for a mortal wound.

I knew now that I was no longer afraid of Slicker Splain. Angelo's words had laid the ghost of superstition, had stripped him of his rank as the bearer of evil tidings.

He had no longer the power to hurt me. I felt the relief of it. I felt like a man who has endured long years of suffering and then the pain is suddenly stopped. I felt like hollering out loud in the night.

I now recalled what Judge Green had told me. That my mother had always been a good woman but she was starved for the things Fort Benton had to offer. She had longed for the companionship of other women, the chance to wear the dresses she'd kept in a trunk all the years on a cow ranch. Bob Hunter bought her the brick house and left her there in town and rode back to his cow outfit. She had met Burt Larrimore who had a way with women and was a handsome, well educated, man. It was later on that she found out how tough and ruthless he really was. She had told Judge Green that he had threatened her

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while he was locked up in prison. He had friends on the outside who would shoot her son in the back.

Now I knew who Burt Larrimore's friend was on the outside when he was in the pen. Slicker Splain. All parts of the jig-saw puzzle were in place.

"Remember, *compadre* Benton," Angelo broke the long silence that he had given me to think things out, "I spoke of the scandal that years ago sent Burt Larrimore away from the Mexican border like a scared wolf? I said then that it involved a woman. It really concerned two women: a dance-hall girl who called herself Juarez Lil and the daughter of a rich *politico*.

"The dance-hall girl's real name was Lily Splain and she was common-law wife of Burt Larrimore, to whom a child was born, a boy. When gossip reached her that Burt Larrimore planned a legal marriage to the daughter of a rich Mexican *politico*, she knew then why the handsome swashbuckling gambler had been ducking the marriage loop to her. In her desperation she made a big bowl of chili con carne and into it she mixed enough poison to kill a dozen men. Juarez Lil and her son ate out of the same bowl. The woman died in agony. The boy vomited up the stuff.

"All Juarez knew about the scandal that had been going on. They would have hung Burt Larrimore, but he took his illegitimate son and disappeared.

"That scandal touches you, tonight, but it also touches the name of a de la Guerra. The daughter of the rich politico Burt Larrimore was to marry was my cousin. Her father would have hunted the man down and killed him but the revolution came and he died fighting the Villastas. His daughter chose to die with him."

The words were spoken into the night, as they rode into the storm.

V

THAT storm! We heard the sound of it, before the black wind reached us with its full velocity. It hissed through the sharp spines of the giant suhuaros that stood out like strange pillars with deformed arms in the glare of the sheet lightning against a black dust filled sky. The branches of the mesquite and catclaw and palo verde brush whispered it and the long dry yellowed mesquite beans rattled as the wind shook them loose to blanket the ground. Strange birds winged their frightened way in hopes of escaping the gale. Coarse desert sand whipped our faces and blinded our eyes with stinging force.

I pulled the black silk handkerchief that was loosely knotted around my neck up across my face before the hide was sand papered off the flesh. The Mexicans wrapped their serapes around their heads and down across their sombreros. And when the black wind gained such strength no man or beast could face, our horses turned rumps against the gale and stood tracked, heads down and the riders humped across the saddle horns.

"Don't git off your horses!" The wind tore the words from Wag's mouth. "They'll jerk away and set you afoot!"

My nostrils clogged with sand and I had to breathe through my mouth. I kept my teeth clenched and even through the portion of the silk the sand filtered into my mouth. In the glare of the sheet lightning the air was filled with sand and you couldn't see the horse or man next to you to recognize either. We were all covered with that same dun color sand blasted on us. And all around us was the din and crash of uprooted or broken trees that went down before the black hurricane. Some of the horses went loco and stampeded, the riders sticking on as best they knew how.

"*Anda!*" The shouted word that passed from one man to the next was loud but by the time it reached the rider ten or twelve feet away, it was no louder than a harsh whisper. "*Anda!* Heads up!"

The rider to the left of me rode close and our stirrups locked and he shouted

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to me to grab the end of his ketch rope and take my dallies around the horn. To take down my own rope and tie hard and fast and pass the end to the next man. To make a rope chain.

"Tie your own rope. Dally mine. Keep about a fifteen foot rope between riders. Give slack if you have to but get it back as quick as you can. Don't untrack your horse till the word gets passed along. Then pass it on to the next man. The Hacienda Las Cruces is no more than two miles away. The wind will be on your right cheek. Keep it there or you'll break the chain. You got it? Any questions?"

"I got it!" I yelled as loud as I could.

"Tie yourn! Dally mine!" a Cross Triangle man hollered.

"Dally yourn!" I yelled back. "Tie mine."

I took enough slack in his rope to reach the next man, and repeated the instructions given me. I was thankful the man wasn't a Mexican because I didn't savvy enough of the language to make myself understood. It was like working blindfolded because even in the lightning glare the dust cut the distance down to no more than twenty feet to make out the riders on either side of the two ropes that linked our saddle horns. There was a long delay while we waited for the signal to start moving.

"Vamanos!" I heard the shout. "Keep the wind on your right!"

"Vamanos!" I relayed the signal. "Keep the wind on your right!"

I pulled the handkerchief down as I reined my horse off, broadside to the black wind. I had to hold him there. When I felt the rider ahead jerk on his rope, I moved my horse at a walk. The rider behind me picked up the signal and his horse followed mine. Once we got lined out the going was easier, but at no time was it any easy chore. There was the brush and the trail twisted in and out in hellish curves and the rope between the riders kept fouling in the brush. The rope burned through the gloves I'd put on and the hardened calloused palms of my hands were rope burnt. The right side of my face felt raw. It was a slow and tedious job and I don't know how long it lasted. But the wind slacked off when I rode into the man ahead of me. I felt the grip of his hand on my arm as I rode alongside. "Slip the dallies. Turn the next man loose. Bunch up. Wipe the sand out of your guns. We're here."

I passed the word along to the next man and when he turned my rope loose I coiled it up and buckled the rope strap.

"Pass word to Benton that Wag wants him." said a man.

"I'm Benton," I said.

"All right. Follow me. Keep close."

THE wind had quit blowing. But dust clogged the air and in the glare of the sheet lightning it looked like a dirty dun colored thick fog. I could hear men all around me smothering their coughing and sneezing. I sensed, rather than saw, that we had come through a wide gateway and were inside a high walled corral.

"Where's Wag?"

"You're talkin' to him," I heard Wag say.

"I fetched Benton."

"Here I am, Wag." My voice sounded dry, croaking.

"I was scared I'd lost you in the shuffle. I've lost two-three I reckon. I picked six men who could find their way blindfolded in any kind of weather and had each of them pick three-four to hang onto the ketch ropes. We circled and come up on the Hacienda from behind. We was filtered into their outside guards before they knowed it. A knife or a machete makes no noise. All cats look gray in the dark. Every man had half an inch of dust on his hide. Every man in my outfit knowed what question to ask when he bumped into a guard in the 'dobe stockade.

" 'Got a match?' a Cross Triangle cowhand would ask.

" 'Wag's got the matches,' would be the right answer to that question. If he

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didn't know it, he woke up in hell with his throat cut. There's a horse trough near you, Benton. Wash your guns off and rinse the sand out of your craw.

"Burt Larrimore and his half dozen Mexican *amigos* are inside the house. He's got Slicker Splain with him. Slicker's gone plumb loco on *tequila* and *marijuana*.

"Larrimore won't expect us on a night like this. Cabezon and Angelo are taking care of the men Larrimore left outside to guard the doors and windows."

I shoved my saddle gun and six-shooter in the long horse trough, to wash the fine gritty sand off. Then I shoved my head and face in and washed my mouth out and drank enough to satisfy my thirst. I rinsed out my handkerchief and squeezed out the water and wiped my guns. I was ready.

I felt a few drops of rain filter through the heavy dust choked air. Chain lightning struck somewhere near and the thunderclap was deafening in the blinding glare. I could make out the high adobe walls of the stockade corral, and beyond the whitewashed adobe of a large low roofed building. The stockade was filled with heavily armed Cross Triangle cowhands. Horses and men drank from the same water trough. It was commencing to rain now and the air was clearing of dust.

A Mexican in a huge sombrero rode through the crowd. He spoke to Wag.

"It's time to git movin', men." Wag spoke quietly. "Cabezon and Angelo are going in through the front door. Me and Benton will go in the back door. You boys scatter out and circle the house. If any of Larrimore's men git past the Mexicans Cabezon has standin' guard outside the windows and doors, kill 'em."

We'd halted close to a whitewashed adobe wall. I could see the faint glow of lamplight behind the drawn shades of a high window. Most of the windows had bars across them. Wag spoke to the Mexicans on guard outside. We stood waiting in the black drizzle.

I commenced to feel cold inside as the rain soaked through. But the cold went deeper to chill my body and knot my belly inside. I could feel the blood pounding up into my throat. I was afraid I would weaken when the shooting started. I had never stood gunfire and I was scared of turning cowardly.

Then I heard a sound no louder than a whisper as it passed from man to man around the big whitewashed hacienda. "Viva de la Guerra!" It was like a wind stirring the leaves in the branches of unseen trees. "Viva Cabezon!" It hissed and grew louder. "Viva Angelo!" It was no longer a whisper but a tense growl as it came and passed to circle the outer wall. I knew that we were fightin' for the de la Guerra name.

I STOOD beside Wag against the heavy door. I had my six-shooter in my hand and the saddle gun carried on my other side. Then came a sound that went clean through me with a sort of shudder.

"Cabezon!" Wag said. The sound must have come up from somewhere inside the man and was spewed out into the black drizzle from his tongueless open mouth.

Wag shoved the heavy door inward and the lamp and candle light inside made me blink. I saw Wag's saddle gun club down a man's head and when a man loomed up in front of me, I knocked aside the gun shoved into my belly and the sharp barrel of my saddle gun chopped down on the bared head. He reeled sideways and towards me and I sidestepped. One of Cabezon's Mexicans was right behind me and he did not step aside. I saw the blade of his machete glitter and come down.

We were in a big kitchen with a brick oven. There was the smell of cooking and boiled coffee. The tiled floor was dirty and littered with broken glass and pottery. Bottles and partly filled glasses were on the long kitchen table. Two men were squatted on the floor. One of them dropped the dice he was about to roll against the wall. Four others sat on the

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floor in a far corner playing poker, their saddle carbines lying near them. Cabezon's men, who had swarmed in behind Wag and me, commenced shooting.

Across the wide kitchen was a closed door and Wag hollered at me as we headed for it. Before we got there the door was flung open and a big paunchy Mexican in a soiled wrinkled linen suit and a red tie the color of his joweled sweaty face stood there, a gun in his fat hand and a bewildered look in his bloodshot eyes. Wag shot him in the paunch and he doubled up and dropped his gun, his hoarse scream cut off.

Beyond the open door was a wide long hallway and I could see into the big room beyond. Massive hand carved dark mahogany furniture and torn tapestries on the wall. The tiled floor was scuffed and littered with broken glass. Half a dozen or more men, some of them bareheaded, others wearing the best hats Stetson makes, some in shirt sleeves, others wearing coats, had been sitting at a long wide table. On the table was Mexican pottery, filled with beans and meat and bread, and partly emptied bottles of red wine and *tequila*. I noticed a wooden bowl of halved green limes. A guitar lay on the floor where it had been dropped and tramped on. It looked like we had interrupted a banquet.

The men scattered, backing away and against the wall. A door at the far end was kicked open. Cabezon came through with a six shooter in each hand, his scarred face a terrible mask of hate. He filled the big room with the same horrible sound I had heard outside. It came right on through the roar of gunfire as the six-shooters belched fire.

Wag was a stride ahead of me when he halted at the end of the hall. I came up alongside and I didn't know I was shooting until I felt the recoil of the six-shooter in my hand.

Everybody was shooting and the gun explosions hammered against my eardrums.

I saw Cabezon stagger a step forward and go down. Angelo leaped across him. I don't think he saw either of us to recognize us as he ran between us and into the hall through which we had just come. I turned just in time to see him fling open a door and go inside, into the blast of gunfire that staggered him backwards. I whirled and followed him. I was no more than a dozen feet away when Burt Larrimore came out, a gun in his hand. Larrimore was looking at me when his gun spat flame.

The bullet felt like a wasp's sting as it cut my cheek open. Larrimore lost his footing and went down just as I pulled the trigger of my gun. Angelo had grabbed Larrimore's leg and jerked, tripping him. My shot had hit Larrimore in the head and he pitched over sideways into a shapeless heap.

THEN I was face to face with Slicker Splain, framed in the door-way to my left with the lamp light at his back, almost within reach of my arm. He was hatless and there was drying blood staining his dirty blonde hair and splattered on his face. Slobber trickled from the twitchin' corners of his loose mouth. There was a crazed wild look in his pale bloodshot eyes. He bared his teeth in a ghastly grin as he recognized me.

"I'm the son of Burt Larrimore, a slimy snake who was ashamed to give me his name. But I dog-trailed him wherever he went. Haunted him like the ghost of the woman he drove to suicide. My mother loved him. She told me so with her last words as she died in agony. I puked up the poison and trailed that woman-murdering skunk.

"I got hopped up to put courage in my cowardly guts. A while ago I tried to kill him. He laughed while he was gun whipping me. Now I got to follow him into hell. I'm takin' you along, Benton. I always hated your gizzard!"

I had my gun in my hand and was thumbing back the hammer. I knew he was going to kill me. But before I could pull the trigger, a gun exploded behind me and I saw the big yellow buck teeth shatter into his slack jawed mouth and

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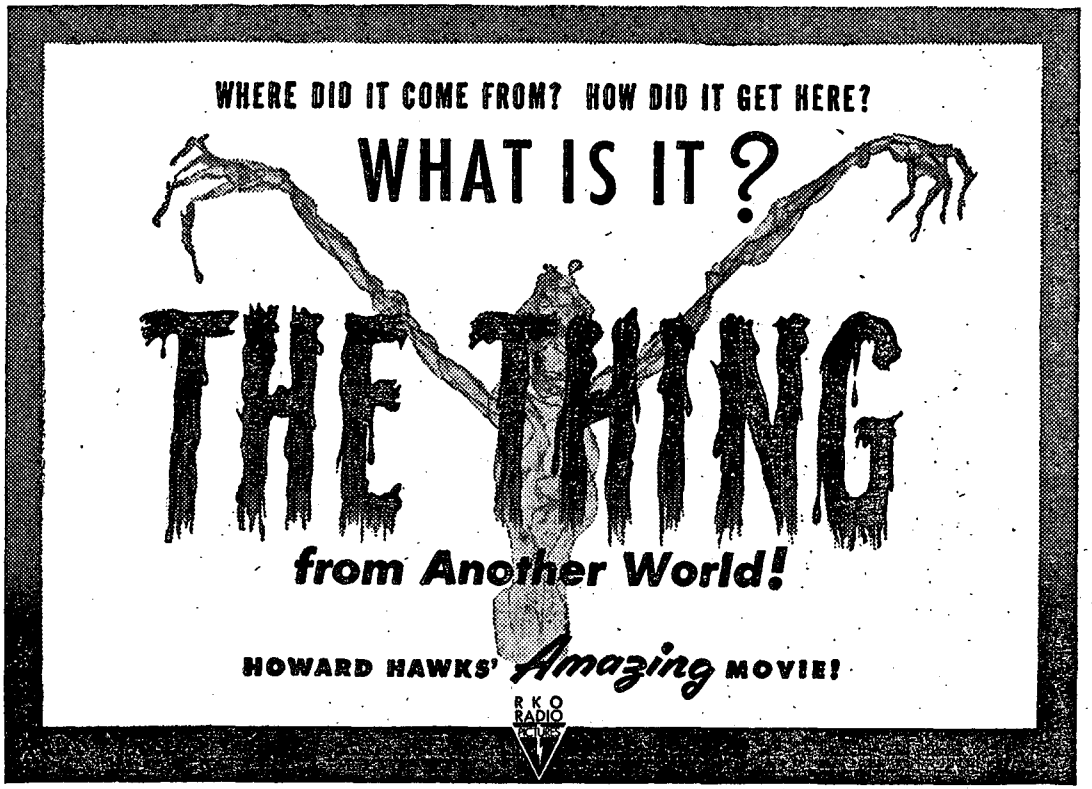
WHERE DID IT COME FROM? HOW DID IT GET HERE?
WHAT IS IT?
THE THING
from Another World!
HOWARD HAWKS' Amazing MOVIE!
RKO RADIO PICTURES

his head lob. I stepped back and away from him as he went down with a dull thud. For a minute there I thought that I had shot the man I had always been afraid of.

"I hope, *Compadre* Benton," sounded Angelo's voice behind me, "that I never have to kill another man like that one."

I turned my head and saw Angelo sitting on the floor with his back propped against the wall. Smoke wisped from the muzzle of the silver mounted gun in his hand.

Wag came into the hallway. His face looked gray and there was a hard, cold look in his squinted eyes that peered at us. "It's all over, boys." Wag's voice had a gritty sound.

"Cabezon?" questioned Angelo.

"Cabezon is dead."

Angelo slid his gun back into its holster and used his gun hand to cross himself. Angelo had been shot through the leg. Wag patched him up and dressed the bullet rip in my cheek.

Wag had his men carry out the dead and bury them. He put Cabezon's body in a room and shut the door. He was buried at sunrise the next morning in the de la Guerra graveyard.

When the hacienda was cleaned up and restored to order, Wag sent some of his Cross Triangle cowhands across the border to bring Dolores to the Las Cruces Rancho.

To anybody not understanding Mexico and its people, it might have seemed a strange way and place for a bride and groom to spend their honeymoon. That was what I wrote to Judge Green up in Fort Benton, Montana. By the time we got settled I received his reply, telling me that he had sold my ranch for a good price and had banked the money in my name. I was glad because we would need it to re-stock the vast de la Guerra grant where Angelo and Dolores and I would make our home.

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COW-COUNTRY QUIZ

① WHAT WAS THE REAL MEANING OF THE WORD RUSTLER?

② WOULD A COWBOY HAVE TO BE STARVING TO EAT A SADDLE BLANKET?

③ WHAT KIND OF A CORD WAS USED IN "HAMSTRINGING" AN ANIMAL?

④ WHY WAS "FANNING A GUN" A SPEEDY BUT USELESS METHOD OF GETTING OFF A LOT OF SHOTS IN A FIGHT?

⑤ WHO WAS THE REAL BOSS OF THE ROUNDUP CREW?

The answers are on page 144—if you MUST look!

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HIS WONDERS TO PERFORM

By
W. C. TUTTLE

The Piegan Kid had a price on his head—and gold in his heart!

THE Piegan Kid sprawled on an old cot in the little attic of the ranch house at the Rocking R. Moonlight filtered through the branches of an ancient sycamore close to the window, drawing queer patterns on the floor and rough wall. One limb of the sycamore grew almost against the window.

The Kid was not there through choice. Two weeks before, traveling over a rough trail in strange country, the Kid's horse whirled away from a rattlesnake, throwing the Kid, and for a few moments his left foot hung in the stirrup. With the foot badly twisted and racked with pain, the kid crawled and hobbled for miles through this land of cactus until he reached the Rocking R owned by Jim Rawlins, known to everyone as "Uncle Jim."

There was "Ma" Rawlins too, a little gnarled sort of woman, well past middle-age, with a heart too big for her frail body, who was well versed in the treatment of sprains, bruises and lacerations. In her time she had treated a lot of them. They carried the Kid into the house and went to work on him, asking no questions. As soon as he was able to move around, Uncle Jim made him some rough crutches and he began exercising the ankle.

Discovering the attic, with a bed already there, the Kid insisted on sleeping up there. They didn't ask him why. There was a window and that old sycamore outside.

The Kid's forty-five crashed down on Slick's head

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The Kid didn't have any name. He had never known a mother or father. His only recollection of a relative was the person he believed to be his grandmother and she was Indian, possibly a Sioux, because of the nickname bestowed upon him at an early age. There was a strong hint of Indian blood in his eyes, cheek-bones and hair. The Kid was only five feet seven inches tall and would weigh about a hundred and twenty pounds.

As a matter of record, the Piegan Kid was wanted in practically all of the Southwest, and the rewards for him, dead or alive, were beginning to be fabulous. The Kid was a will o' the wisp outlaw, of whom there had never been a photograph, and whose descriptions were not only vague, but very misleading. The Kid couldn't read, but he had heard himself discussed many times as the perpetrator of crimes he had never heard about before. No peace officer ever gave this scrawny young man a second look.

WHILE the Rawlins family did not talk about their own troubles, when the Kid moved upstairs he discovered a wide crack and a knothole under a bear-skin rug, where he could not only listen to conversation in the main room, but could also see the talkers.

It wasn't long before he realized that the Rawlins family had a son, Johnny, who was in serious trouble. In fact, he was in jail at Smoke Tree and had been sentenced to hang for murder. The Kid figured that was why the old folks prayed so long every night. Johnny was convicted of shooting a man named Buck Frawley. Johnny's only alibi was that he was drunk, and didn't know he had fired the shot.

Twice a lawyer came in the evening and talked with them. The Kid didn't understand much of this talk, but one night they talked about Johnny only having two days more to live. He had been refused a new trial. That was awful tough luck for Ma and Uncle Jim, decided the Kid. But what could be do about it? Somehow he wanted to help them out of this situation, but couldn't figure any angle. They had been kind to him. Why, Ma even called him son! That was quite a sensation for the Kid.

As he sprawled there on the cot, flexing the ankle, he decided that in the morning he would ride away. Someone knocked heavily on the door downstairs, and he heard voices. Sliding out of bed, he shoved the rug aside. There was a strange man down there, a man who wore a big black sombrero, with lamplight flickering from the silver on his hat-band. The Kid loved silver trimmings, and he loved big hats. He had an instant desire to possess this one.

Ma and Uncle Jim sat down, but the stranger paced up and down the floor.

"Slick, what do you want of us?" Uncle Jim asked.

The man stopped pacing and faced them.

"My testimony convicted your son," replied Slick slowly. "I'm the only witness."

"We know that Mr. Haynes," said Ma quietly.

"All right," said the man, "I want ten thousand dollars."

For several moments no one spoke. Finally Uncle Jim said:

"Ten thousand dollars? Are you crazy, Slick?"

"Just like a fox," snarled Haynes. "Here's the deal. A month ago you sold that old Cross-of-Gold mine for ten thousand dollars. It ain't in the bank—it's right here—all in cash. I'm pullin' out for Mexico tonight, Rawlings—and here's the deal:

"For ten thousand dollars—cash—I'll write and sign a confession that I killed Buck Frawley. I need money—you need to save the neck of your son. Do we trade?"

"You'd trade a confession of murder for money, Haynes?"

"I've made the offer, take it or leave it. If you leave it, I'll shoot the both of you and tear the house down to find that

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money. And you won't save your kid, Rawlins. Now, do we tra[illegible]?"

"You don't leave much alternative, Haynes," said Uncle Jim.

"I'm no fool. Go get that money!"

"No—not yet," replied the old rancher. "First, you write that confession. Ma, get him a piece of paper and the pen and ink."

Slick Haynes laughed shortly but didn't argue. The Kid, with one eye glued to the knot-hole, watched the big man closely. He saw Haynes sit down, gun at hand, and write for a long time. Finally he signed his name, laid the pen aside and handed the paper to Uncle Jim. Rawlins glanced at it and passed it to Ma.

"Jim, you know I haven't found my glasses for a week," she said.

"You read it—out loud," said Uncle Jim, handing it back to Haynes.

Haynes read it carefully. It exonerated Johnny Rawlins of any part in the murder of Buck Frawley and put the whole blame on the writer. The two old folks nodded when Haynes asked them if it was all right. Haynes watched Uncle Jim go over and remove a loose stone from the old fireplace. Ma was watching Uncle Jim too, but the Piegan Kid was watching Slick Haynes.

Uncle Jim came back from the fireplace with the money, and as he began counting it, Slick Haynes handed the folded confession to Ma. The Piegan Kid slid the rug back and limping a little, went to the window where he slid outside, grasped the sycamore limb and went down the tree.

He crouched at the gate as Slick Haynes came from the house and hurried down the path. Haynes was whistling quietly when a forty-five crashed down on his head and he went to the ground without a murmur. There was not a sound except the soft calling of a mocking-bird, saying, "Peter, Peter, Peter," over and over again.

"Peter," breathed the Kid. "That's what I told them my name was. I had to tell 'em a name." Then he laughed quietly, standing beside the gate, looking down at the black mass of Slick Haynes.

The Kid awoke early next morning. He could hear Ma rattling dishes at the stove. He heard her call to Uncle Jim.

"Look, I've found my glasses! They were in the cupboard."

The Kid was unable to hear his reply, but in a few moments he heard her exclaim:

"Jim! Jim, this ain't no confession—it's only blank paper!"

The Kid shoved the rug aside and peered down. The old folks were standing there, looking at each other, and Ma was crying.

Uncle Jim said huskily, "He knew I couldn't read—and you couldn't either—without your glasses. That dirty coyote!"

He walked slowly over to a window. From outside came the beat of hoofs, stopping at the porch. The Kid heard Uncle Jim gasp.

"No! It can't be! Ma, it's— Johnny!"

THE door banged open, and both figures were out of the Kid's vision, but he could guess what wasn't being said just then. After a while he heard Johnny's hoarse voice.

"No, Ma I didn't break jail. Don't you understand—I'm free—exonerated! Ma, will you listen? This morning, at daylight, the sheriff found a confession, shoved under his office door, and tied to a porch post was Slick Haynes. It was his confession to the murder of Buck Frawley! I didn't do it."

The Kid shoved the rug back and reached for his boots. He could hear the muffled voices downstairs, as they held their jubilation. It choked the Kid a little, and he wondered just why. He limped a little, as he came down the narrow stairs. The air was redolent of breakfast.

Johnny didn't want for any introduction, but came and shook hands.

"Ma told me about you, Pete—when you first came," he said.

"She's wonderful, Johnny," said the

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Kid. "I never knowed anybody like her. Her and Uncle Jim saved my life—and I can't do a thing to pay her for it."

"I've been paid a million times over," declared Ma tearfully. "Pete, you didn't know it—but—or did you?"

"I couldn't help hearing something, Ma," replied the Kid. "I'm shore glad he got loose."

"It was a miracle," declared Uncle Jim. "Set down and eat, boys."

After breakfast, the Kid said, "I'm drifting along, folks. The ankle is all right. Some day maybe I can pay you back for what you've done for me."

"Gratitude is the best pay on earth, Pete," said Ma. "You are welcome to stay as long as you like."

"Thank you, Ma. Well, I'll be drifting."

HE shook hands with each of them and turned to the door.

"I'll ride from the stable, folks," he said quietly, and walked out.

Uncle Jim walked over to a window and watched the Kid limp down to the stable. Ma was standing at the table, her arm around Johnny, when the Piegan Kid rode away from the stable, heading for the hills. He turned and waved toward the house. Uncle Jim lifted his arm, but realized that the Kid couldn't see him.

"Johnny, we never know," Ma said. "The Lord has many a mysterious way, his wonders to perform. Isn't that true, Jim?"

Uncle Jim was looking through the window. He said, "Eh? Oh, yes, I reckon he does, Ma. Yeah, awful mysterious."

He shook his head and glanced down at the broad window-sill. Staring up at him was a thick envelope—an envelope he had seen many times. With a trembling hand he reached down and picked it up, hardly willing to believe his eyes. It was the ten thousand dollars in cash, still in the same envelope that Slick Haynes had taken from them last night.

Slowly he turned and walked over to the table, placing it there in front of Ma Rawlins and Johnny.

"I found it on the window-sill," he said simply.

"Our money!" breathed Ma. "I can't believe . . ."

"We've got to," said Uncle Jim.

"But Slick Haynes never went near that window, Jim."

"I know he didn't, Ma."

Uncle Jim went back to the window, staring out across the desert hills, but the Piegan Kid was gone.

"Jim, how on earth could this have happened?" Ma asked.

"Ma, the older I get, the less I'm inclined to question the Lord's mysterious ways. We've got Johnny and we've got our money."

It may have satisfied Ma and Johnny, but Uncle Jim had seen what they hadn't—and that was the Piegan Kid, riding away from the stable, *wearing Slick Haynes' black sombrero, with the silver trimmings.*

●

Next Issue's Featured Headliners

RIDERS OF THE DAWN

An Exciting Novel of the Fenceless West by LOUIS L'AMOUR

DIAMONDS AND THE DEVIL'S SEAL

A Rollicking Novelet of a Zany Smuggling Trail by W. C. TUTTLE

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A Book Bargain ROUNDUP

by TEX MUMFORD

WITH April showers on the way, it might be a good idea to stock up on some reading matter for rainy Sundays or those early spring evenings when the house is nice and cozy with the rain drumming on the roof. As usual we've looked over the gather and cut out some prime reading stock for you. Here's four whose brands we've examined. At two bits a head all four will cost you one iron man, for plenty of rip-snorting thrills.

THE HAUNTED HILLS by B. M. Bower

There was a ghost on Sunbeam ranch, a vicious ghost that slaughtered flocks of sheep by breaking their necks, that left strange footprints, neither human nor animal, that produced strange ghastly wails and cries. Shelton Sherman had seen the prints and heard the cries, and he had seen too, a horrible unearthly shape that drifted through the night. "Shoot if you see it!" Alec Burney, his boss, told him. But can you shoot a ghost? Then a sheepman's neck was broken and skeptical ranchers, knowing Alec Burney hated sheep and sheepmen, branded him the murderer. But Sherman knew his boss hadn't done the killing, so day and night he rode the hills to find an answer to the riddle—rode in the face of the terror which was sweeping the country.

His ride struck the trail of a monster such as the country had never seen and brought Shelton Sherman face to face with a horrible death!

THE FAR CALL by Jackson Gregory

Jesse Bodine, stage driver, brought his bloody vehicle careening into town. Behind him was a brutal holdup, with two men left dead as a result and the bandits fled without trace. It left a scar on Bodine's mind, a scar which was always there, even though the incident faded as the years went by and he prospered. Wealthy and prominent, he courted a girl, Kate Haverill, only to find a powerful rival, Hackamore Breen, entrenched as his most dangerous adversary. And then Bodine discovered that Breen was the man behind that long ago, almost forgotten Yellow Jacket stage holdup!

A hate that he thought dead roared in his brain again and with it a cold desire for vengeance—and justice against this smiling killer. Coldly he laid his plans, gambling all on one fierce move—to force Hackamore Breen into a final suicidal gun duel, with Kate and his life as the stakes, and Boot Hill for the loser!

THE DESERT HAWK by Harry Sinclair Drago

Few men had stored up so much hatred for themselves as Jim Cantrell. He was the kind who smashed opposition out of his way by direct force. When he saw and desired the lovely Frazier Thane, his first act was to get rid of the man she loved—Lin Kincaid. He did that by framing Kincaid on a horse thief charge. Then he drove Kincaid's father, with his flock of sheep off the range. That done, he set out to take Frazier whether she was willing or not. And as always, his approach was the direct one—grab her!

But Frazier was no weakling. Her response to a grab was to snatch Cantrell's upholstered gun out and turn it on its owner. And Kincaid, the man who was supposed to be disposed of, was not lying down either. He was up like an avenging angel to reap the harvest of hate and murder which Jim Cantrell had so arrogantly sowed!

EDGE OF BEYOND by James B. Hendryx

Jack Drewry was a tenderfoot in the frozen north, a place no tenderfoot should be. Drawn by the lure of gold he had been sucked into a stampede at the Edge Of Beyond, a gold mining camp, where he lost his shirt. Still not cured of gold fever, he struck out into unmapped country north of the Edge, into land the old sourdoughs claimed was laced with black gold.

Hurt and half frozen, Drewry was picked up by Helene Beloit, a lovely girl of the north who brought him to her father's house and began the long job of restoring his health. Inevitably, Jack Drewry fell in love with her. But there was something strange about the girl, some reserve she held between them. He could not understand it until Sam Dryden's taunting words burst upon him: "So you fell for a half-breed!" Then a killing rage swept him and he lunged for the man who could let his stupid bigotry ruin a girl's life. A real thriller!

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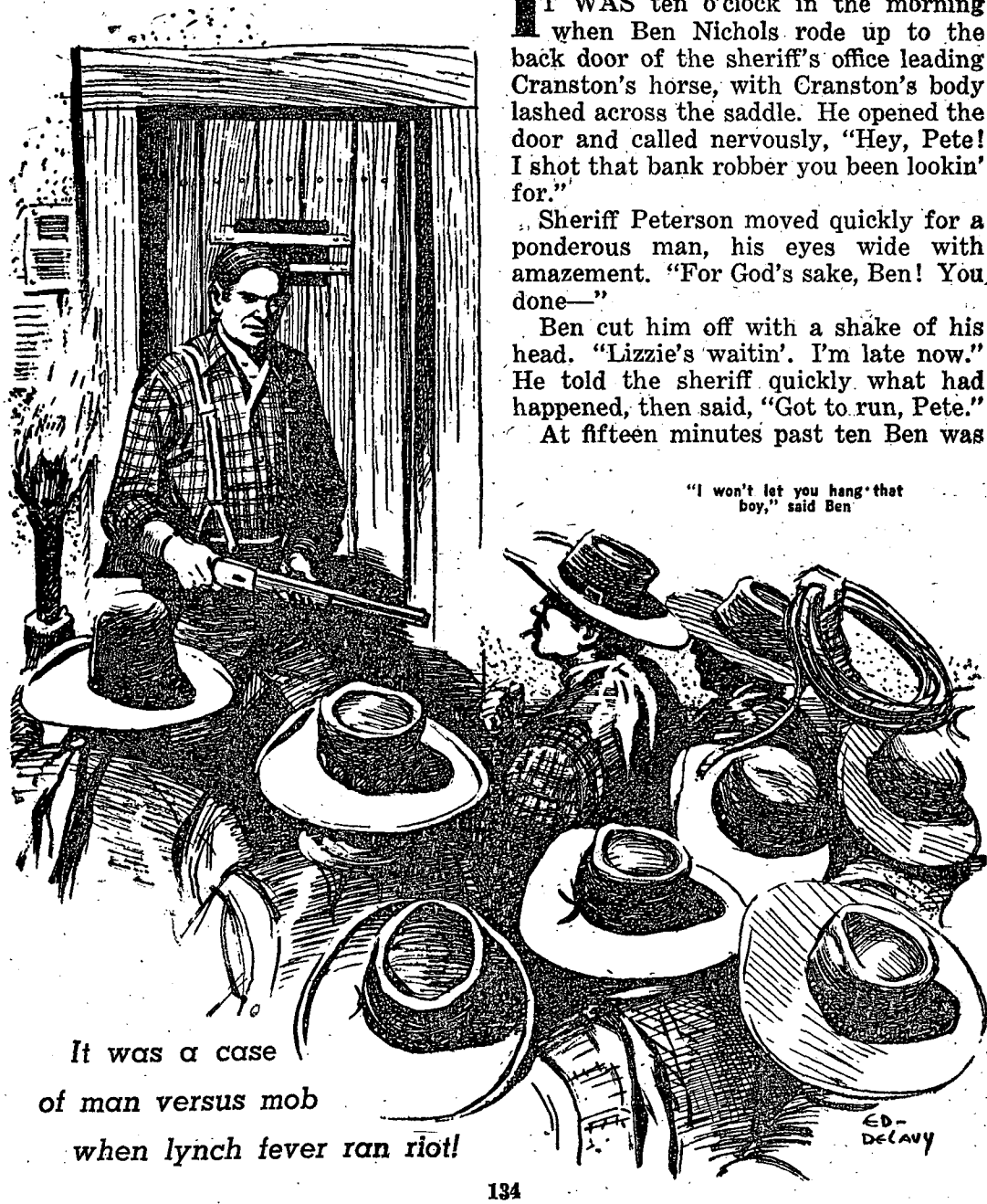
The Cottonwood Affair

By JOHANAS L. BOUMA



"I won't let you hang that boy," said Ben

It was a case of man versus mob when lynch fever ran riot!

IT WAS ten o'clock in the morning when Ben Nichols rode up to the back door of the sheriff's office leading Cranston's horse, with Cranston's body lashed across the saddle. He opened the door and called nervously, "Hey, Pete! I shot that bank robber you been lookin' for."

Sheriff Peterson moved quickly for a ponderous man, his eyes wide with amazement. "For God's sake, Ben! You done—"

Ben cut him off with a shake of his head. "Lizzie's waitin'. I'm late now." He told the sheriff quickly what had happened, then said, "Got to run, Pete."

At fifteen minutes past ten Ben was

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in his store, opening a barrel of crackers delivered early that morning. Lizzie had made a stinging remark about some men imposing on their wives, and had gone home in a huff. She was a bossy woman at best, and Ben knew better than to open his mouth when she was on the warpath. He had great respect for his wife's tongue.

By ten-thirty everyone in Cottonwood had heard the news, and Ben's store was swamped. Jim Breen, who owned the Trail Inn Saloon, shoved a hand the size of a ham across the counter.

"Dammit, Ben! Put 'er there! Soon as I heard about it I told the boys the drinks are on the house when Ben Nichols puts his elbows on the bar."

"That's right kind," Ben said cautiously and shuddered to think of what would happen if Lizzie ever heard of him entering a saloon.

Herb Tyler, local dignitary, cleared his throat importantly and boomed, "You've done us a great service, Ben. Speaking for the citizens of Cottonwood, all I can say is we are grateful."

"Well, now," Ben stammered, "it wasn't much—"

"Hear him!" Mr. Ames, the banker, cried. "There's a reward, Ben. Ain't much, but when you get the time to come down to my office, I'll pay it to you."

They cowded around, they slapped his back, they pumped his hand until it tingled. A young man shouted to be heard.

"The *Clarion* wants a story, Ben!"

"Let's have it quiet!" someone called.

BEN swallowed. Never in his thirty-nine years had he known such acclaim. Never, in fact, had he been the center of attention. From seven in the morning until eight at night his pudgy figure moved flat-footed around his store, waiting on trade, stocking shelves, talking to drummers, writing merchandise orders. He was known as a mild man who never argued a question, who slipped penny candy to the children only when Lizzie wasn't around. A good day, to him, was when his wife didn't enter the store. His wife or a drunk. Ben was afraid of both.

Ben's one passion was hunting. He liked nothing better than to rise at dawn and ride his old mare around the country, his .22 rifle across the pommel of his saddle. It was then Ben found his real self. If he shot only an occasional cottontail, it didn't matter. He would hunch on the old mare's back and go back in his mind to his boyhood, and the wagon train, and he would hear the wheels grinding, and see the dust rise in a cloud, and at such times he was an advance scout of the party, looking for Indian signs.

Afterwards, he was always a little ashamed of the daydreams, of seeing himself as the kind of man he could never be. But it was only on Wednesday mornings, when trade was slow, that Lizzie allowed him to go off by himself, so that now it was his one bright spot in the week. Sometimes he would go over in his mind how it was that he didn't get out more often, but he had never been able to figure it out. It was as if Lizzie was holding invisible wires that pulled him the way she wanted, and only on Wednesday morning, till ten o'clock, was a wire missing.

Now, recounting his adventure, something dormant in him awakened. He saw the breathless crowd hanging to his every word, and he splurged a little as he told his story. Now and then he paused to wipe his perspiring face with his apron, and as he worked toward the climax his voice became stronger and stronger.

He'd left the house around six that morning, first riding along the river bottom. He remembered the deep-green flow of the water as the first sunlight broke across the far mountains, and as he talked he saw an occasional trout leaping clear in a flash of silver.

He'd climbed the first hills with the sun, glancing now and again at his watch to make certain he'd be back in town before ten. He followed an old trail into

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a box canyon, fighting the brush, and had been about to turn back when he heard the sound of hoofs coming toward him.

The brush was high, there was a scattering of scrub pines around, so that he hadn't seen the horsemen, or they him, until they were some ten feet apart. He'd recognized Cranston right off, but in the first moment of stunned surprise he hadn't known that the other man was Charlie Gordon.

CRANSTON and his younger brother Dave had been raised in the country. The week before, the Rimrock bank had been robbed, a clerk killed during the holdup, and someone had recognized Cranston despite the mask. Both Cranston and his younger brother had been missing since then, so folks knew for a certainty that they had pulled the job.

Ben had remembered all that in those first few seconds he faced Cranston and Charley Gordon. Charlie had whirled his horse around like maybe a posse was hiding in the brush, but Cranston had gone for his gun. Ben broke off in the telling of it about then, and the *Clarion* man said impatiently, "Then what happened?"

"Well, he got his shot away all right," Ben said. "Bullet glanced off my saddle. That's—when I shot him."

"What about Charlie Gordon?"

"Made a run for the brush. I threw a shot at him."

"Did you hit him?"

"He jerked some when I fired. Hit him in the shoulder, I reckon."

What Ben didn't tell was how he'd happened to shoot Cranston in the first place, and later it bothered him some. Cranston's shot had been instinctive, and Ben's old mare had snorted and bucked sideways to the trail. What followed was still unreal to Ben, and at the time it had been like moving in a dream, while the grip of fear held him powerless.

He'd had the rifle across his belly, and with the bucking he'd somehow pulled trigger. Cranston had stiffened only a little before slumping and rolling out of the saddle. That too had been like a dream, and Charlie making a run for it, going through brush as high as his horse's flanks. Ben could hardly remember shooting at Charlie, but Charlie had jerked around in the saddle like he was ready to fall. The next moment, he'd disappeared, and only the sound of brush breaking to tell how fast he was traveling.

Ben had shook like a freezing colt as he walked up to Cranston. He'd turned the outlaw over and hadn't even been able to find where his shot had struck until he'd opened the shirt to see the small, bloody swelling below the heart. Then he'd been sick for sure, with all kinds of wild thoughts making his head spin. But he'd got the body on the horse and had led it out of the canyon toward town.

There was a hush after Ben had finished telling it, and then Herb Tyler said, "Sheriff Peterson and a couple of Slash T boys rode out after Charlie. I reckon they'll get him, too. Now if we can corral young Dave, we'll be rid of the whole gang. String the both of 'em sky high."

Ben said uneasily, "Could be Dave wasn't in on that bank holdup. Boy ain't but seventeen. Seems like yesterday that tow head of his was no higher'n this counter."

A few men in the crowd growled that young Dave was in it, all right, and then the bunch of them moved slowly outside, talking.

Ben let go a long sigh, relieved that the story was told, yet feeling a little chuckle of pride of himself. Something had happened to him, and he wasn't quite sure what it was, only that it made him feel bigger than he'd felt in his life. The more he thought about it, the more he figured that his actions that morning had been instinctive, and that all men facing grave dangers had the same experiences.

A little past noon the back door

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opened and Lizzie came in bearing a steaming, cloth-covered tray. Ben stared at his wife. She was a thin, shapeless woman who didn't bother much about her appearance. But now her hair was fixed really nice, and she was wearing her next-to-best dress.

She placed the tray on the counter, lifted the edge of the covering dish. Never a day but she fixed sandwiches, but now the fine smell of corned beef and cabbage assailed Ben's nostrils. A little glint appeared in his eyes.

Lizzie didn't quite meet his gaze. She patted her hair and said, "Thought you might like a hot meal for a change, Ben."

"Nice," Ben said guardedly.

She pretended to straighten a few bolts of cloth on the end of the counter. "Might make up a new dress out of this one," she murmured, then added, "Folks tell me you run across Cranston this morning. You didn't mention it."

"Not worth mentionin'," Ben said.

"Right brave thing you did."

THE little gleam grew in Ben's eyes. Lizzie was blushing! He took a slow breath and made his voice casual. "Reckon I'll eat in the back room. You got time to watch the store?"

"Why, yes." She picked up the tray. "I'll fix a place."

Eating, Ben couldn't get over the wonder of it all. He could hear Lizzie talking to customers out front. Somehow, she sounded different. The edge, so to speak, had gone from her voice. Once he heard her laugh, and he grinned a little. No telling about a woman, no sir!

On Thursday and Friday he was busier than he'd ever been. Folks continued to drop in to congratulate him, and they invariably made purchases before leaving. And Ben noticed something else. Before, most folks had just walked in with a short nod for greeting; now they shook hands and asked his advice on different matters. But the biggest surprise of all, was Lizzie helping him out. She'd always hated waiting on customers. Now she smiled and nodded when folks praised her husband. She accepted it like a flower accepts the sun.

Late Friday afternoon, the sheriff and his posse returned, and they had Charlie Gordon with them. "He'd trailed out across the mountains," Peterson said. "Could tell by the signs that he'd been hit, and when we got him he was too weak to make a fight of it. Doc Hammer says he'll be lucky to last out the night."

"Save us hangin' him," a man said. "Cut any sign of young Dave?"

Peterson shook his head. "Tried to get Charlie to tell if Dave was in on that Rimrock holdup, but he's been unconscious since we caught him. I figure Dave to be hidin' out close by."

Charlie Gordon died without regaining consciousness. All day Saturday the store was filled, and Ben grew a little surly with being asked to tell over and over how he had shot the two outlaws. Now that he'd had time to reflect on it, he saw things in a different light. Killing Cranston had been a matter of luck. It seemed like he was cheating to accept the acclaim, and yet there was nothing he could do about it. It came to him that man was a strange animal. Ben had worked hard all of his life. He'd never lied, or cheated, or knowingly stepped on another man's toes. These things had never brought him a word of praise. But a blundering accident had earned him esteem from all in the valley.

It was late Saturday night when he made preparations to close the store. He swept out and locked the front door, and while turning down the lamps heard a noise from the backroom. Since Lizzie had left for home an hour ago, he wondered if a customer or a drunken puncher had wandered back there. Some six years ago a drunken rider had balked on paying for harness; he'd pulled a gun and put three shots through the floor at Ben's feet when Ben protested weakly. A moment later the rider's foreman had come in, knocked his rider down with a

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hammer swing of his fist and had grinned at Ben. "Hurt you?" he had asked casually. "Don't mind. Boy's just havin' some fun."

Since then, Ben had looked warily and with hammering heart on all drunks who entered his place, but now, making his way past kegs and barrels and stacked merchandise to the back room, he felt only a mild anger at being bothered. He picked up a lamp and stepped through the doorless opening, and from the back of the dark room a voice said, "Put that lamp down easy and don't move."

Ben lowered the lamp as its light penetrated the room. He peered intently and saw a slim figure step from behind a pile of stacked bales.

Moving, he said, "Dave! What're you doin' here?"

The boy gave a hard laugh. "You killed my brother and you ask me that. I told you to stay put!"

The six-gun in the boy's hand was on level with Ben's stomach. He felt a light sweat break out all over him, but he kept his voice steady.

"Was you in on that Rimrock holdup, Dave?"

"Didn't know about it till after," Dave said. "But that ain't why I come."

"You come to kill me," Ben said flatly, "and that's wrong. Your brother fired first."

The boy didn't answer. He moved forward, pulled something from his belt and laid it on top of a barrel out of Ben's reach. It was a gun, Ben saw, and then heard Dave say in a tight, nervous voice, "You got a chance comin'. I ain't ever killed a man, and I don't aim to kill my first one in cold blood. I'm countin' to three, Nichols."

"I ain't goin' for it," Ben whispered huskily.

HE HEARD the boy count one and his hands were moist and they trembled. But his mind was calm enough, and he was thinking more about Dave Cranston than he was about himself. He could look back and remember this boy coming into the store and looking at the candy case with hungry eyes. More than once, when Lizzie wasn't around, Ben had slipped the boy a bag of sweets, the boy taking the bag with a hoarse "Thanks," and disappearing at a run down the dusty street. This happening now was all wrong, but how could he tell the boy that? Dave would be thinking of his brother killed, the Cranston pride would be boiling in him, wanting revenge. In this moment of rash hatred he was taking his first steps on the outlaw trail, and him with his whole life ahead of him.

Ben felt a little sadness, because boys like Dave always reminded him of the sons he'd never had. He heard Dave say, "Three," and he ducked sharply away from the gun on the barrel, hearing the shot, and on top of it sound of the door slamming open. Then there was another shot, Dave's gun clattered on the board floor, and he held tight to his bleeding arm, pain and fright twisting his young face.

Sheriff Peterson stepped across the room. A dozen men crowded the doorway. Peterson said, "You all right, Ben?"

"Sure," Ben said, his knees weak now that it was over.

"One of the boys saw Dave ride up the alley," the sheriff said. "Figured he'd come here. Just in time, from the looks of things." He took Dave's arm roughly. "Attempted murder. The jailhouse for you, boy."

"Now wait up a minute," Ben protested. "Me and Dave was havin' a talk—"

"Ben, don't try to stick up for him," one of the men said, and it was Jim Breen. "Reckon you mean well, considerin' you killed his brother, but this one belongs to us."

A growl of assent came from the crowd.

Peterson said in a flat voice, "You got that wrong, Jim. He belongs to the law, and he'll stand trial."

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The sheriff's gun was still in his hand. He motioned with it and pushed Dave out ahead of him. "Call the Doc, somebody," he said, then stopped in the doorway to say, "Ben, you best come along and tell what happened."

A half hour later Ben left the sheriff's office, but instead of turning at the corner toward his house he walked the length of the street and turned in at a picket fence. A hanging sign there said, WILLIAM GOODBODY, *Attorney at Law.* Ben knocked on the door and a small man with a white goatee opened it and said, "Come in, Ben, come in. What brings you to see an old broken-down lawyer?"

Ben stepped inside and Goodbody indicated a plush chair. Ben sat down and said, "They got Dave Cranston. The boy had nothing to do with the bank robbery. I want you to defend him."

The old man looked at Ben with shrewd eyes. "That's strange, coming from you. The town won't understand this, Ben."

Ben sighed. He didn't quite understand it himself. But he'd believed the boy, and for the first time in his life a stubborn feeling was in him.

"To hell with the town," he said. "Dave, why—he's just a boy."

"So was Billy the Kid," Goodbody said softly.

"Dave ain't like that," Ben said. "You watched him grow. You know he's always been a good boy. So I'm askin' you to defend him."

Goodbody thought a moment. "All right, Ben," he said finally. "I'll talk to him in the morning." He paused. "But you know how the town feels. There has been no trouble in the valley for many years now, and they won't like this. They'll be against us, Ben."

Ben got up. "Then we'll fight 'em."

WALKING home, there was uneasiness in him. As he turned off the main street he saw a dozen riders gallop in from the street's other end, whooping

[*Turn page*]

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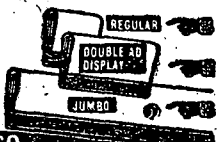

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shrilly. Lizzie was on the porch when he went up the steps; she came quickly toward him and said, "You all right, Ben?"

In the soft light he saw that her face was anxious, and he said gruffly, "Sure. Why shouldn't I be?"

"Well," she said, and the old snap was back in her voice, "you can be certain they'll make quick work of that Cranston boy. Why, you could be dead this very minute if—"

Ben's heavy face tightened. "Shut up, Lizzie," he said. "I don't want to hear it."

The minute he'd said it, something inside of him cringed. Not once during their mariage had he ever told Lizzie to shut up, and he waited now for the lash of her tongue. Her mouth opened and closed and her hands fluttered against her breast. "Why, Benjamin Nichols," she gasped. "I didn't think the day—"

"Well, it's come," Ben cut in roughly. "What's on the stove?" He went past her into the house.

"There's a piece of steak left."

"I'll have that and coffee," Ben said, and settled himself on the sofa in the parlor.

After he'd eaten, Lizzie, her eyes warm, pecked him on the cheek and went to bed. Ben looked at the weekly town paper that had come out the previous day. His story was on the front page. He frowned at it, tossed the paper aside leaned over the table to put out the lamp. That's when he heard a knock on the door.

He opened it, recognizing the puncher as a Bar B man. The man swayed a little, his eyes dull, a fool grin on his loose mouth. He said, "Boys tol' me to fetch you. There's gonna be a hangin', an' they figured you'd be the one to tie the knot."

His voice suddenly hoarse, Ben said, "Where they got him? Who started this?"

"Why, it just started. He's still in the jail. But the boys got Peterson tied

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up, so there won't be no trouble. You comin'?"

"I'll be there," Ben said bluntly.

He knew what he was up against, and he thought quickly of how he could handle it, and he groaned softly. He'd witnessed more than one lynching, always hating himself for looking on, even though he'd never taken a part. There was something in a mob that was like a prairie fire nothing could stop. It had to burn itself out. It was as if one mind took possession of a crowd, pushing it to one purpose. Ben walked softly into the bedroom and heard his wife raise up from the bed and say, "Who was that, Ben?"

"A fellow," he said shortly. He got his rifle from the closet, checked it with fumbling fingers.

"You comin' to bed?" his wife asked.

"Later. I'm goin' out for a spell."

She sat straight up. "You're what?"

"Goin' to the saloon," Ben said. His voice shook a little, but that came from anger and the fright in what he had to face. "Gonna get drunk!" he shouted and slammed out of the house.

When he turned the corner and saw the tight pack of drunk-driven men boiling in front of the jail, he stopped and felt a shudder run through him.

He was a mild man, never open to argument, backing out with timid smile if one threatened. Never had he stood up against another man because there hadn't seemed to be any point to it. But now his sense of injustice concerning young Dave pushed him forward. It was stronger than the quivering fear in his belly. He realized, too, as he moved around the edge of the crowd, carrying the rifle, that he might fail. The crowd wanted a kill, it was the great beast waiting to pounce, and if he showed his fear it would brush him aside.

Someone called, "There's Ben now. Open up and let him through, boys!" Another man shouted, "Goin' huntin', Ben?" and the crowd moved and rocked with harsh, knowing laughter.

[Turn page]

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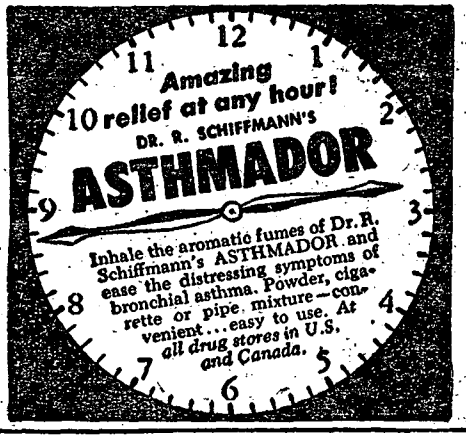
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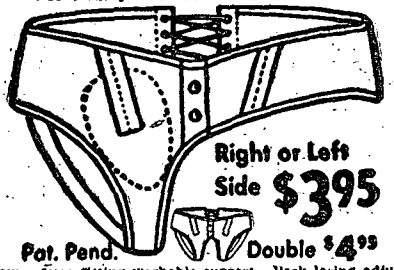

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JIM BREEN and a half dozen men stood to one side of the door. They picked up a great log, Breen saying, "That damn Peterson hid the keys and won't tell us where. Ready, Ben?"

"Yeah," Ben said hoarsely.

He put his back against the door and gripped the rifle. The men ready to batter the door down faced him, and Breen said, "One side, Ben."

"No," Ben said.

All around the mob men held lighted torches. In the flickering flames Ben saw Breen's face sharpen, then Breen turned his head to say something to the man behind him. Slowly, the word spread, the surge of noise subsided, and Ben had the feeling of standing on a stick of dynamite, with the fuse sputtering a yard away.

The mob pushed forward a little, and the faces fixed on Ben were fierce and demanding. Breen said in a loud voice, "What's got into you? I said one side!"

Ben pressed his lips together, his back rigid against the door. He said, "This ain't justice. You can't take that boy out and hang him. There's such a thing—"

A great shouting rose, drowned out his voice. Ben could feel something build up inside of himself. He lowered his shaggy head a little and there was a sharpness to all of the sound and he let his eyes travel slowly over the mob.

It's me or them now, he thought, and heard Breen say, "Get away from that door, Ben! We don't like to hurt you!"

The thing that moved inside him became cold, and with it was mixed a terrible loneliness. He waited for another moment of silence and said, "Might be I'll be hurt, but it'll be worse for some of the rest of you. I reckon you know I'm a pretty fair shot with this gun, and if you think I'm bluffin', just come ahead. You, Breen, and you, Tyler, will be the first two, and I don't aim to miss."

The muttering grew, and died again, and Ben said, "I'm a peaceful man. Never had trouble. Ain't a man here that likes it, and I'm thinking you'd be

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mighty sick if this thing was to happen. You, Matt Stewart. You got two boys near Dave's age. How'd you like to see them dance from a rope if they were to get into trouble that wasn't their fault? Dave didn't know till after that his brother and Charlie robbed that bank, and he's got a trial comin' to prove it. The same way Stewart would want his boys to have a trial."

The noise lifted again, a few threats were called, but a dozen men at the back of the crowd moved away. A gunshot was startling in the street. Beside Ben a splinter flew from the door. Ben didn't move. He said, "I'll make it plain. Charge this door and some of you will die—"

"You won't walk away from it!" a man jeered.

"There's this difference," Ben said. "I'm ready for it. Now if any of you want to join me, make your move," and he pointed the rifle at Breen's chest.

Breen's face paled in the torch light. He peered at Ben as if searching for a sign of weakness. Then he took a step back and his hand came up to rub his mouth. He turned to Tyler, who had been standing next to him, but Tyler's frock-coated figure was moving rapidly down the street.

Ben said softly, "Make up your mind, Breen," and Breen gave him another long look, then turned abruptly and shouldered through the thinning crowd to his saloon.

The crowd dispersed slowly, then faster and faster as if relieved that it was over. A few cursed Ben in passing, but they were the ones who had stayed in the shadows, on the fringe of the mob. As the last of them moved away, Ben felt himself grow limp. The rifle shook in his hands. For a moment longer he leaned against the door, seeing sheriff Peterson crossing over from the saloon.

Peterson said, "Damn them! Breen got me over on the promise of a special bottle, and the next thing they had me tied in his back room." He swore sud-

[Turn page]

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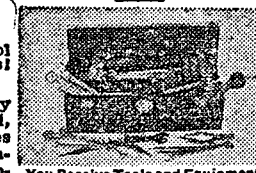

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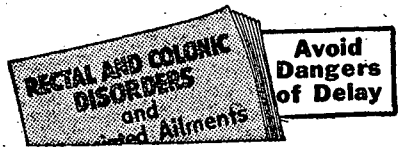

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denly. "Standin' here, makin' excuses. And you—" He shook his head. "I reckon the town owes you a vote of thanks. They might've killed you, Ben."

"I reckon," Ben said.

"Jim Breen's sorry, now that it's over. Reckon the rest of 'em are too. Jim says that any time you want to come over—"

"Yeah," Ben said slowly and gave a long sigh. "Let's go and see what Jim's got in that special bottle."

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON PAGE 128

1. Originally a man who was a "rustler" was an energetic, ambitious, hardworking fellow—a hustler. When he hustled a little too energetically his operations sometimes went over the fine edge of honesty and thus the term rustler gradually became synonymous with thief.

2. Not at all. "Saddle blanket" was a common range term for flapjacks, or pancakes.

3. None. To hamstring an animal was to cripple it by severing the tendon just above the heel—the Achilles tendon. It was a favorite tactic of wolves, who could accomplish it with one slash of their sharp teeth.

4. Because a heavy gun like the .44 or .45 had such a recoil that it would be bouncing all over the sky and accuracy under such conditions would be impossible.

5. The foreman may have given orders, but the real boss—the "tyrant" of the roundup—was the cookie who ran his department with an iron hand, took no nonsense from anyone, drafted all the help he needed to get firewood and other such chores and was handled with kid gloves by everyone so as not to arouse his wrath.

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Pete fussed and fumed, but did nothing much about it until the rustler got one of his prize horses. Then Pete took out after him. He came back a few days later, alone. "Catch him?" some one asked.

"Yep."

"Well, where is he?"

Pete thought about that a minute. "The poor fellow was kind of unlucky," he explained. It seems that Pete had caught him all right, with the horse in his possession. So Pete tied his hands behind him and started back, leading the horse. With nightfall Pete was tired, but was afraid to go to sleep. So he left the man sitting on his horse with his hands tied and slipped a noose around his neck, throwing the slack end of the rope over a limb and tying it just loosely so it wouldn't hurt him.

"I figured that would keep him out of mischief," Pete explained, "and I went to sleep. It was kind of embarrassing when I woke up though," he admitted. "I'd plumb forgot to tie the horse and it had kind of drifted off, hunting graze. Sure must of surprised that poor feller. He was just unlucky, I reckon."

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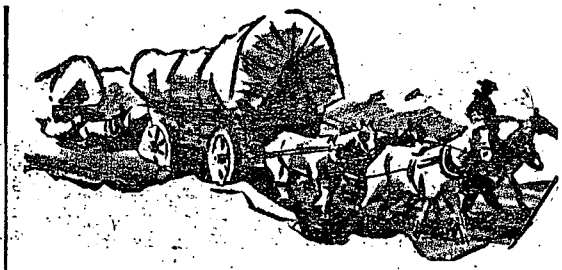

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By BOB YOUNG

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Answer to Problem on Page 105

Jim Randall took off his coat, and after he'd gotten the steer to its feet again, hung the coat quickly over its horns. The blindfolded animal, unable to see anything, stood still. Jim got to his horse. Once in the saddle, he rode past, leaned over and picked up his coat. Then he was well away before the steer could collect its muddled wits. And once on its feet, the animal would probably be all right.

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—Continued from Back Cover

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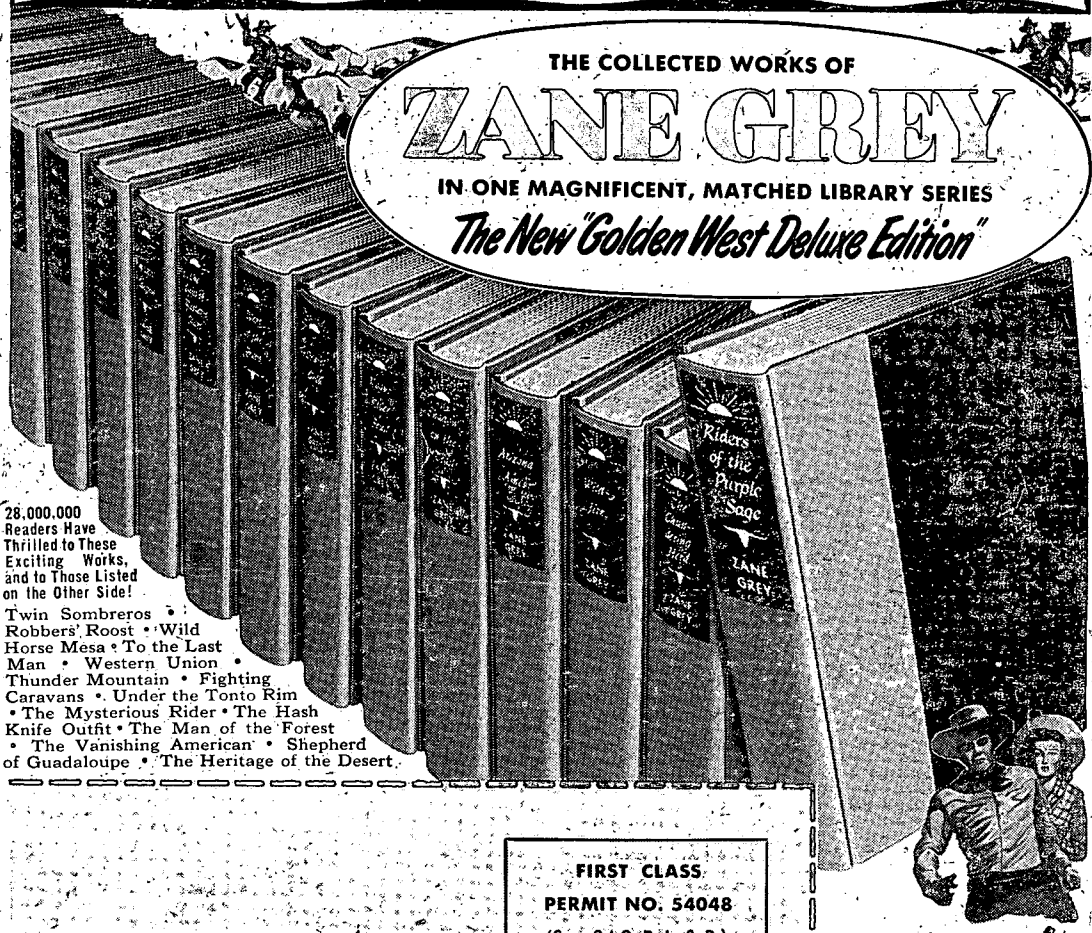

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